

Ethics and Employee Management: A Love Story

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Ethics and Employee Management: A Love Story

by [perictione \(leclairage\)](#)

Summary

Megatron tries publishing his essays under a pseudonym. Optimus Prime uses a fake identity to contact his new favorite writer. As the two factions fight over the resources of a small alien planet, the war rages on. Both leaders have never been happier.

Notes

It's been a blast writing for the first TF Big Bang! I'm so excited to finally share it with you all.

The amazing [coppernickels](#) has created [gorgeous art](#) for Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 of this fic, go check it out on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#)!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“A spark thrumming close to yours, and a mind that knows you and is known...”

– Hadron, “In Defense of Hope”

“In light of Lord Megatron’s generous contribution to the debate, it is clear that my own views, previously explicated elsewhere, have been misled. I cannot but be grateful for the stunning work Lord Megatron has done in his recent monograph, which makes clear to us all the folly of denying the doctrine of double effect.” – Carnivac

“In ‘For the Greater Good,’ Lord Megatron cuts right to the heart of the debate on the doctrine of double effect with his usual acerbic wit.” – Onslaught

“Another masterful addition to our Lord’s oeuvre! Carnivac surely will not dare to continue espousing his now demonstrably fallible views.” – Tarn

Megatron resisted the urge to break his datapad in half.

Instead, he glared down at it and kept scrolling through the reviews, the recommendations, the responses... Not that the responses to his latest article deserved to be called *responses*. They certainly weren’t adding anything new to the debate.

“A masterful addition to my ‘oeuvre,’ is it?” he scoffed to himself. Under his breath, “Did any of these fools even bother to read it?”

I never thought I would miss the days when pampered towerlings were churning out books just to call my ideas trash, Megatron thought. “At least they bothered to engage with the arguments,” he muttered to himself.

He sighed, deeply, and set aside the datapad. He was almost tempted to publish something that was obviously pure drivel just to see what contortions his Decepticons would go through to praise it. But no, no that would only make things worse.

His hard-earned reputation was the real problem, wasn’t it?

He sent a message to Soundwave, still deep in thought.

His third-in-command arrived in his office and Megatron explained the idea.

Soundwave’s response was characteristically simple and scathing. He said, “Mysterious Cybertronian: distributes manifesto on the Galactic Interlink. Everyone: will think ‘just like Megatron.’”

Megatron stood, and paced behind his desk. Gesticulating vaguely at the datapads, he said, “But there hasn’t been a single substantive response!” He picked one up and waved it, “See, look at this one. Tarn dedicates *four pages* to my genius. There isn’t even an argument!”

Soundwave looked at him silently for a long moment before speaking. “Megatron: desires honest critique. Megatron: desires honest praise.”

Megatron glared, but he couldn’t dispute that.

“Decepticon philosophers: inadequate to the task. Megatron: should approach Neutral philosophers.”

He almost laughed, “Neutrals? The Autobots might offer more intelligent conversation.”

Still. It wasn’t a *terrible* idea. It should have been unnecessary, but it was a solution to the problem.

“I don’t see why my Decepticons can’t just try debating me like intelligent beings,” he grumbled.

“Do we fear death? Or do we fear the loss of what our expectations promise us?”

– Hadron, “When Is Death an Evil?”

Optimus had become so engrossed in his reading that Prowl had to comm him directly before he noticed the beep indicating a visitor at his office door.

As the tactician came inside, Optimus put down his datapad. “Sorry about that, Prowl. I didn’t realize we had a meeting scheduled.”

“We didn’t,” his second-in-command replied, “I only needed to deliver some secure documents to you in hardcopy, and I wanted to point out the more salient points. I hope I wasn’t interrupting.” He handed Optimus several datapads.

“No, no, I was only reading.” Optimus gestured to his personal datapad. “Do you have any interest in philosophy?”

Prowl hesitated and pursed his lips. “I have enjoyed topics in the philosophy of math?”

“Ah,” Optimus said, trying to keep his disappointment private. He hadn’t even finished reading this essay, and he already deeply wanted someone to discuss the material with. “I suppose you wouldn’t know about this author, then. He’s fairly new to publishing, as far as I have been able to learn—an author by the name of Hadron—and he’s just put out something new about the moral value of death. I don’t agree on all points, and some elements are puzzling, but I’ve found it extremely compelling.”

Optimus trailed off, looking down at the text on his screen again.

Prowl reached out a hand in implicit request, so he handed it over. Prowl skimmed the first few pages. “I can’t say I can appreciate the content, but the writing style seems quite advanced.” Prowl returned the datapad to the desk. “Of what species is the author?”

“Oh, they’re Cybertronian. Neutral.” Or at least Optimus had assumed so based on the forums where Hadron had been publishing his work. And no ‘Hadron’ was listed in any of their records for either faction.

Prowl looked thoughtful for a few moments before speaking. “If you have questions about the content, why not contact them directly then?”

Optimus startled and laughed, “I doubt that a message from the Autobot Prime would be well-received.”

For many reasons, he had never become directly involved with the community of Cybertronian academia in exile. Even before the exodus, comments or writing from the Prime would have carried more weight than the work itself deserved—whether positive or negative. He had no desire to make a philosopher he already respected uncomfortable.

But Prowl didn’t seem to be listening to him, looking into the middle distance, tilting his head. After a few moments, his optics focused back on Optimus, and he said, “That won’t be a problem. Jazz asks what name you’d like to use on the false identity he’s constructing.”

Ah, short-range comms. But—Optimus reset his optics. “What?”

Prowl waved his unspoken concerns aside, “Nothing fancy, just enough to pass a cursory search on the grid. We won’t even need an image capture. Just think of a name, and let Jazz know if you want to seed a particular backstory.”

Prowl made it all sound so sensible, so easy, that Optimus still hadn’t conjured proper words by the end of this speech. A shaky sort of excitement was building in his spark. Still, it was such a frivolous thing: wanting to send glorified fan mail to this stranger. He hadn’t even registered membership in the forum before, despite reading its entries for many years. But before he could tell Prowl not to waste his time, his second had picked up the top datapad from the stack and was changing the subject.

“This is the latest report from the celestial cartography survey team. They’ve found several promising potentials for acquiring erbium, though more investigation will be required before we can say for certain.”

“I—thank you, Prowl,” Optimus said, beginning to read the document and refocus on his duties. He’d worry about Hadron and his own new false identity later. It would be fun.

After all, what harm could one message do?

Soundwave had to alert him to the message waiting on his pseudonym account.

Private messages were unusual—for Megatron personally, but also among the intelligentsia, where the practice was to play out debates in the public venue of the grid. He’d received a few polite notes at the beginning of this farce. One had been infuriatingly condescending, as if Megatron

needed a pat on the back for taking the ‘brave’ step of sharing his ideas with the universe, and the others had been mostly meaningless.

He shouldn’t have been *annoyed* when the first few essays were received with little fanfare—that was exactly what he had *wanted* after all.

He had only published three short essays so far, so he could hardly expect ‘Hadron’ to be garnering the attention of a broader circle of peers yet. Not that the essays were performing badly, exactly. Tyrest—who, for all his grandstanding, Megatron considered only *moderately* significant to modern Cybertronian philosophy—had already published a response to the first foray, and it had been refreshingly argumentative, if unoriginal and slag-suckingly idiotic. He was working on an appropriately scathing public response.

Being addressed as ‘Hadron’ was grating, too. ‘Megatron’ had been his name for so long at this point. He’d gotten used to it. Hadron was a good name, of course. But it made him feel like an imposter—which he was—and like he was being denied credit for his own work. Still, it was good enough. Anything more sophisticated would have given the game away. Soundwave had talked him out of several other, grander choices, like Vis Major, or Legion, which his communications officer hadn’t deemed subtle enough.

So he’d stopped checking for messages, and he didn’t have high hopes for the content of this one.

[AGS 22.678.18.5 17:22:03]

New Message Request

Origin: CONVOY, user-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Destination: HADRON, author-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Dear Hadron,

I’m writing to you about your recent essay, “When Is Death an Evil?.” I hadn’t ever considered the topic of mortality from this perspective, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. Your writing is so evocative and clear that I could hardly stop reading.

I am only an amateur philosopher, but I can’t resist asking some follow-up questions. In your conclusion, you suggest that the relationship between the moral value of death and an individual’s expected lifespan are related directly.

I know most of the essay approaches the topic in relationship to intraspecies metaethics, but you do make some general normative claims. Do you have a way around the implication that in a normative sense specific individuals have more or less value, based, for example, on their current state of health? That problem is keeping me from accepting the rest of the argument.

Again, I must tell you how much I enjoyed the essay. I also enjoyed your other work—especially the beautifully accessible way you communicate concepts—but I noticed that you only started posting to the CBF recently. Have you published anywhere else? I’d be very interested in reading more from you.

With respect,

Convoy

Convoy.

Megatron didn’t recognize that name. But then, he wouldn’t. They didn’t have anything like complete records on Cybertronian neutrals. Those Cybertronian exiles without faction affiliation

had scattered to the stars, unrecorded, settling among foreign peoples or forming their own small colonies. Soundwave snapped up any census data he could glean from them as it came up, but information on specific individuals was hard to find.

The loosely collated Cybertronian grid remained, carefully maintained by factions and neutrals alike—and propped up on the infrastructure of the general Galactic Interlink. But without the old framework of Cybertron's extensive registration system, anonymity reigned.

Megatron could hardly complain, taking advantage of it as he was.

Convoy. Hm. He'd ask Soundwave, but a cursory search wasn't pulling up anything of interest. He wasn't a writer, and didn't seem to keep an active public presence on any forum. He knew there were no Autobots of that name. It was a friendly name. Strong.

Megatron's contemplation of his identity fell away quickly though, as the questions Convoy had raised absorbed his processor's attention. He hadn't considered the problem of *illness*, so much as of statistical generalizations. It was an interesting conundrum. And saying, oh, his conclusion simply doesn't apply in the specific was too sloppy an answer. He wanted to make a claim about the *expectation* of longevity, but that didn't quite fill the gap either.

Before Megatron quite realized it, he was writing out a response.

After all, the mech had asked to see more of Megatron's writing, and he could hardly send him a copy of *Towards Peace* without blowing his cover.

Optimus was standing on the bridge as they prepared to drop out of hyperspace into the Axis system. Axis 4, the home of a people called the Ongredix, didn't have the sort of planetary defenses that would require caution on approach, but they were still going to bring the Ark in some distance away out of politeness.

Axis 4 held vast stores of the rare-earth metal erbium—or more specifically, the naturally occurring monzanite ores from which it could be mined. Since any kind of resource gathering on Cybertron had been made impossible by the war, the Autobots hadn't been able to acquire any more of this very necessary mineral. It was needed for delicate circuit-based repairs to mechs and machines, and they were running dangerously low.

The Ongredix put a surprising amount of emphasis on business and commerce in their value system, and Optimus hoped that would help rather than hinder the Autobots in negotiating with them.

He and his command staff technically had a budget...but Optimus considered it very flexible. Open market prices on refined erbium were prohibitive, and the Autobots had the ability to refine the ores themselves. He would need all his skill in diplomacy to keep these aliens from learning how seriously the Autobots needed what they had to offer.

Perceptor, leading the navigation team, announced, "We are exiting hyperspace now, sir."

Optimus felt the usual disorienting effect hyperspace transitions had on his gyroscopics—the sensation of movement without movement—and then the blur of non-color on the viewscreen resolved itself into a spread of twinkling stars, a green, glowing planet, it's bright parent star in the

distance, and—and—the Decepticon flagship *Nemesis* in a dark silhouette across their starboard bow.

It would seem the Decepticons had learned of the value of this planet too.

The *Ark*'s bridge immediately became chaotic.

A flurry of orders brought their defenses and weapons systems online, but before shots could be fired, Blaster announced that they were being hailed.

Frowning, Optimus told him to accept the contact, and Megatron's sinister face appeared on the viewscreen.

"Do you have an original idea in your head, Prime? You always seem to be copying us Decepticons," Megatron said, laughing. Optimus resisted the urge to snipe back at him.

One of them could be mature.

Instead, the Prime said, "We won't let you harm the people of this system."

His nemesis glared. "Axis 4 and it's resources will be *ours*, or they will be no one's."

In a silent message, Perceptor told him that the *Nemesis* was powering up its weapons. Optimus signaled a response to prepare for evasive maneuvers, grateful as always for the battlemask that kept his distracted expression secret. Full of conviction, but with his processor focused on the coming fight, he said, "The Autobots will defend the Ongredix. Their natural resources belong to *them*, not the Decepticons."

"If you won't retreat, then I will *make* you," was the response, but just as Megatron said it, the two Autobot cruisers accompanying the *Ark* dropped out of hyperspace, flanking them. Optimus saw the contacts show up on his screen, and from the surprised—then infuriated—look on Megatron's face he'd seen a similar readout.

The crew on the bridge of the *Ark* heard Megatron's snarling growl before the communication was rudely cut off. Immediately, the *Nemesis* powered up its engines and began to retreat.

There was an audible shifting of armor on the *Ark*'s bridge as the tension relaxed. But Optimus knew that if the Decepticons had gotten here before them he might still have other problems to worry about. "Blaster, contact the Ongredix representative and find out if the Decepticons have threatened or attacked them. Tell them I'm prepared to meet with them as scheduled if they're still comfortable with that arrangement."

As it turned out, the Ongredix were happy to meet them.

He spoke briefly with a group of them by comms, before making the trip down to the planet's surface, fortunately remembering to adjust his proprioception to the much lower standard of gravity on this planet before actually taking his first steps.

Only slightly smaller than Cybertronians, the Ongredix greeted Optimus and his entourage with extraordinary friendliness that involved all six of their arms. Optimus wondered if they had heard little of their war, or if the Decepticons really had scared them that much.

They never did get the answer to that question. What *had* the Decepticons done while they were here? The Ongredix brushed off all inquiries about that as unimportant, and led Optimus, Ironhide, Perceptor, and Blaster, who was translating until the rest of them could get language packs,

through an elaborate greeting ceremony involving the exchange of ritual bribes.

Their primary contact with the government was an individual named Angred. She explained the rituals and the identities of each important personage they met, and she served as the primary vehicle for their negotiations. Apart from providing Perceptor with a sample of the ore their planet produced, not much progress was made toward reaching a deal. And while Optimus tried to convey the Autobots' assurance that they would protect this planet from Decepticon attack, none of his negotiation partners seemed either worried or interested.

After another ritual bribe exchange, they adjourned for the time being, and Optimus returned to the ship. Prowl reported no sign of the Decepticons returning, and then Optimus retreated to his quarters for recharge.

Tired and frustrated, but not completely exhausted, he collapsed on the berth and idly checked for new messages to his fake account.

[AGS 22.678.18.6 09:44:21]

Origin: HADRON, author-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Destination: CONVOY, user-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Optimus had to stop after he read the origin of the message. Such a gift felt too good to be true after all the stress of the day. Even as his spark pulsed with excitement, his processor drummed up a series of very irrational anxieties: what if Hadron had thought contacting him was presumptuous? What if he had thought his questions were foolish?

He hadn't needed to worry about having his ideas dismissed since shortly after ascending to his office. He was *the Prime*. Even if they didn't approve of him, or the Primacy, they didn't *dismiss* him. He knew it was irrational to worry. He had been studying philosophy—admittedly as an amateur—for millions of years, and if this writer thought he was being rude, then, well, what would that matter?

He would feel the blow, and the embarrassment, and then it would be over. Only one more for the list of things for him to deal with that day.

He read on.

Convoy,

I'm pleased you enjoyed the essay. I haven't published anything in the same line as my recent work that I could share with you, but I do have some rough drafts on upcoming topics. Discretion would be important while they are still unpublished, but if you are interested, I can forward them to you.

You make an interesting point. My concern in the essay was very much for the aggregate case, but I can see how applying the broader premise to the specific would cause problems. For example, it's obviously not morally acceptable to kill a mech because his frame will soon collapse from the shoddy way he was built.

I don't think I actually need to allow for the specific, however. Since part of the problem with intersentient metaethics in the first place is the lack of the usual, averaged collective normative framework—which arguably makes the project impossible—I don't think it's troubling to not be able to apply it to the specific case. I was intending it as an assist for macro utilitarian calculus involving multiple species in large numbers.

With that said, I would like to think more on it. A puzzling topic, certainly.

Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Your original missive was short, do you have any further thoughts on the subject?

Hadron

He could see how the argument could be made that interspecies metaethics was a doomed project, but he really didn't think that meant that the individual was unimportant—but it was so *wonderful*. Hadron wanted to hear more? Hadron might send some Optimus of his unpublished, working drafts? Optimus smiled, and sighed, and grinned, and started writing his reply.

[AGS 22.678.18.21 16:32:07]

Origin: HADRON, author-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Destination: CONVOY, user-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Do you have a private line we could use? This format is not as fast as I would prefer.

[AGS 22.678.18.21 16:55:45]

Origin: CONVOY, user-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Destination: HADRON, author-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Yes, I do. The grid address is EX57110003MW.

Hadron hadn't hesitated to make use of Optimus's private line. Though it was Convoy's private line, actually—Jazz had set it up with the appropriate fake credentials. He'd launched right into a continuation of their ethics discussion, and they'd only stopped chatting when they'd needed to recharge. After that, Optimus had felt bold enough to ask questions about other subjects, and they'd worked their way through several stimulating discussions, as time and duty permitted.

Optimus didn't know why he was surprised when the topic of Primus came up.

[AGS 22.678.18.25 15:26]

H: You don't mean to tell me that you're religious.

C: It's not so strange. You can hardly deny the existence of Primus.

H: Ha! I could, but that would be pointless. There was certainly something at work in the heart of Cybertron—but it was no god.

C: Oh really? What makes you think that?

H: For argument's sake I won't bring the Primes of the past into it, but Optimus Prime is all the evidence you need. It's well established that he was chosen by the Matrix, and that he carries it still, you agree?

C: Yes.

H: And we may say that the holder of the Matrix is Primus's special friend, yes?

C: Most people say 'representative.'

H: Fine, fine. So the Prime is the genuine article, mysteriously connected to Primus, imbued with his power and wisdom, and so on and so on. And yet! Under his rule our planet has been laid waste, the great wells of Cybertron dried up, our species scattered among the stars, he and his embroiled in a war that has lasted a million years. I could go on. And you still say that mech is the representative of god?

H: I say that the Prime's failures are evidence enough that Primus is not all-powerful, not all-seeing, not all-wise. If he exists, which I don't accept.

H: Anyway, Convoy, you don't talk like a religious bot. In all our discussions of morality, you haven't referred to Primus as a foundation for metaethics once.

C: I suppose I'm strange. I believe that God is fallible.

H: Hm. Fair enough.

Optimus set his datapad next to him as he got on his berth. He sighed, and decided not to pursue the argument. He couldn't offer the evidence of his own experiences, and he couldn't deny Hadron's analysis.

Primus was fallible. And *he* was fallible. Horribly, disastrously fallible.

Optimus laid down, feeling the passive energy support of his berth connect to his systems. He thought for a long time before writing his reply.

C: In ages past, when Prima held the Matrix of Leadership, Cybertron was conquered by the Quintessons. Primus couldn't stop it.

I believe Primus is powerful, but not all-powerful. Wise, but not all-wise. Seeing much, but not all-seeing. He tries, but trying is not always enough.

I realize this is more bleak than the usual doctrine. But I also believe that Primus loves us. I believe that the embrace of the afterspark will be one full of joy and reunion. And that is a comfort, even as the world falls down around us.

H: Convoy, has anyone ever told you how well you write? No one's ever managed to convince me religion isn't just an enormous scam before. You're sincere without also being stupid. I still don't believe in it, but still.

C: Do you know, I don't think anyone ever has. Thank you.

[AGS 22.678.18.28 18:06]

C: I won't claim that I have an exacting philosophical argument for this, but I believe that all lives have value, whether they're the lives of Cybertronians once classed as disposable, or the lives of

some of the alien species I've met on my travels.

H: I think comparing oppressed Cybertronians to organics is insulting, at best. But setting that aside, surely you don't regret setting foot on an alien world and crushing the various microbes under your feet?

C: True enough. I don't have ethical pangs about that sort of thing. But will you admit that the lives of *some* alien species have value that at least comes close to the value of Cybertronian lives?

H: Oh, fine, theoretically yes. But it's determining that sort of thing that's exactly the problem. Where does the line exist for you, of which alien deaths you regret and which you do not?

C: I won't pretend that isn't a difficult question. Defining sentience is an issue no species has produced a satisfactory answer for. Intelligence, organization, language, but ability to love is also a part of it for me.

H: What a bleeding spark you are. That sort of criterion is not only hideously vague, its vagueness makes it vulnerable to the exact kind of discrimination against organics you say you want to avoid! You might as well say you 'follow your spark' in these matters.

C: I did say it was a difficult question. And...I suppose that I do 'follow my spark.' I think that life is precious—even organic life.

Sometimes I think it's even more precious in some ways, like it's a sort of miracle. Primus's spark ignited our species, our world, and each one of us is part of that great flame. But organic life appeared by chance from the maelstrom of the universe, fighting for every bit of existence, for every bit of intelligence and beauty and love. Sometimes I wonder if there isn't something even more wonderful about that. A chance, a coincidence, creating sentience where none was planned. How much more precious should those lives be, for being so unlikely?

H: I keep forgetting that you're religious. It is a great way to make giant leaps in philosophical arguments, at least. But even then—these organics, on your account, aren't going to be preserved forever in the afterspark like you believe a Cybertronian will. They'll be gone again, forever, in the barest section of our lifespan.

C: But doesn't the shortness and impermanence make their lives more valuable then?

H: You know, I did write an entire essay where I came to the conclusion that it does not.

C: Yes, yes. Though you yourself said that it applied in the aggregate and not the specific. Not that I agree with the original claim, but why, then, on your account, couldn't it be the reverse for individuals?

H: What, that the shorter lifespan of a collective gives their lives less moral weight, but the shorter lifespan of an individual gives them more moral weight? Ridiculous.

C: Aha! So then you agree with me, that a shorter lifespan means more moral weight for both the group and the individual?

H: No... Probably not. I'll have to think on it. I'm sure I'll be able to work out a solution eventually.

C: I look forward to hearing it.

[AGS 22.678.18.30 17:56]

H: Determinism? Yes or no?

C: No, absolutely not. The future is un-fixed.

H: Evidence-based denial or consequences-based denial?

C: Hm. I'd like to think both. I assume you mean to ask if I reject determinism because of what it means for our free will as sentient beings, or because of its plausibility.

H: Yes. I confess, this is one of few areas where I succumb to sentiment. I refuse to believe that our choices don't matter. I find it easy to reject Primus as a source of determinism, but refuting the physical account is more difficult.

C: It's a compelling question. Have all our actions been dictated by the movement of the first quarks after the beginning of the universe? Still, setting aside the religious account, conservation of energy is the linchpin, and I think our own sparks are evidence against that.

H: Just because we haven't figured it out doesn't mean there isn't a physical explanation for how spark energy is generated.

C: I like that account though. It's a beautiful thought—that our sparks give us the power to shape the universe.

H: You're getting mystical on me again. Also—doesn't this present a problem for your support of the value of organic life?

C: Oh, I set myself up for this, didn't I.

H: If free will comes from the spark, then can unsparked beings really be sentient?

C: Ah well, I'll have to revise my thinking on free will somehow.

H: I look forward to hearing what you come up with. Though... It is so refreshing to hear someone base free will and sentience on sparks. It's not so unusual now. But the war began because not every sparked mech was treated as a conscious, thinking being with their own free will.

C: Very true. One thing about our current world that I could never regret.

H: And you're right. The idea that our sparks are what allow us to change the world around us is a beautiful idea. Thank you for sharing it with me.

There was a strange quality to Megatron's conversations with this neutral. He felt like he was sending messages not to a person, but to a concept, or to something that was as much a construct of his own mind as something unto itself. His words pushed out into the cold of space and sent an echo back.

Many times, he'd been tempted to reveal his identity to Convoy. He knew the quality of safety to

their conversations was an illusion—he didn't *really* know this mech, he couldn't *really* trust him—but it was such a compelling feeling.

The initial, purely intellectual exchanges had been so blissfully stimulating, like drinking pure energon from a deep spring on Cybertron after he'd been starving. He could propose any idea to this stranger, with no consequences to his own reputation, and then hear a response that his reputation hadn't tainted. Whatever Convoy said about his work, Megatron knew he *meant*. What a luxury.

And he was always so sincere.

Megatron's mind felt clear. Sharp. Whetted on the challenge of real debate, honed against the critical edge of Convoy's incisive processor.

[AGS 22.679.01.10 16:42]

H: I've been considering what you said about life as valuable in itself. You're religious, how can you place so much value on perpetuating life when you believe the afterlife is so wonderful? 'Til all are one' has just been nonsense propaganda since before the war, but it does have roots in religiosity. How do you reconcile that?

C: I don't necessarily. It's a comfort, that promise. But it's not...the afterlife is not another life. At least, so the thinking goes. It's not just as good as how we are now. It's not *worse*, exactly. Not worse at all. But...like I was saying before, the idea that sparks are generative?

The allspark has its own sort of power, but it's not...you can't change anything. There's communion, and communication, and love—which I have to say even though I know you'll laugh—but there's no activity.

So, 'til all are one, it's a comfort, that we won't go to emptiness or pain. I also think of it as a reminder that we are all from the same spark. I don't think anyone in the galaxy can imagine peace in the Cybertronian species. But we are one. And if we manage to end ourselves forever, well, we'll be one again.

H: Hm. Mystical, wishy-washy, and compelling. I'd even go so far as to say: internally consistent.

C: Truly high praise. I'm honored.

Megatron had routed the alerts from his personal correspondence direct to his HUD, and when he received the ping alerting him to Convoy's message, he didn't hesitate to pull it up on his datapad.

Starscream wouldn't be finished talking for a while, after all.

He was going on about some new project that Megatron had already decided to reject. How foolish did Starscream think he was? A shrink ray? Like he hadn't heard his second complaining about Megatron's size advantage on a dozen different occasions.

Starscream usually put more effort into his assassination attempts. Hm.

Megatron made a mental note to be more vigilant. The shrink ray might be a ruse.

Convoy answered messages promptly, a quality Megatron appreciated. He'd sent his latest thoughts on the relationship between morality and government the previous evening, and already had several paragraphs back at this early hour. He couldn't be sure, but they seemed to be running on similar schedules. He rarely received messages while he was in recharge.

He settled in to read the new message and ignored Soundwave's tilt of the head in his direction. The rest of their staff would easily assume that he was looking over Starscream's plans.

He began to read.

As he worked through the opening paragraph of Convoy's letter, he received a second, shorter message, which he read first.

[AGS 22.679.01.13 08:52]

C: Just realized that I got a bit off topic there. Hope my difficulties at work are at least a little entertaining to you. I often find myself wondering what your opinions of day to day challenges would be. Sorry about that.

Well, Megatron certainly hadn't started publishing anonymously in order to give life advice to a strange neutral on their boring office job. But he found that he didn't at all mind, when it was Convoy. He was even curious, as he scrolled back up to the earlier message and began to read. His troubles were definitely entertaining: something about an endless meeting with a client of some kind and a subordinate—an employee, Megatron assumed—who decided to spray their coworkers with temporary glitter paint to 'wind down' afterwards.

And there was something flattering about being asked for advice on something so mundane. It wasn't unusual, exactly, his opinion was vaunted across the quadrant, after all. But still. Convoy didn't know anything about *Megatron*, or what he'd accomplished, or his position, or what he'd done. Convoy wanted his opinion because his writing was impressive on its own, and because their conversations had been stimulating.

Yes, there was something terribly flattering about that.

Just as he began to consider a response, Megatron realized that the room around him had gone quiet. He looked up. Every person around the table was staring at him, but especially Starscream, who was still standing, but now with his mouth hanging open. It was a supremely unattractive view.

As Megatron made optic contact, Starscream bit out, "Why are you smiling!?"

Just as Megatron was queueing up the words: 'What are you talking about?', the position of his face, his mouth, the tightness of his facial structures, registered in his processor. He *was* smiling. Not a very big smile, unfortunately—he could probably pass that off as a veiled threat—but a *small* smile, just softly stretching the corners of his mouth. Thinking quickly, he morphed that smile into a threatening grin.

Narrowing his optics at his second-in-command, Megatron purred, "Why, I'm just so amused by your presentation. Do continue."

Megatron waved his hand dismissively across the table at him. Starscream still looked too

disturbed to keep going, but Megatron knew the silence wouldn't last.

Soundwave, meanwhile, had tilted his chin down in a subtle dig at his commander's moment of inattention. The rest of the staff present for this meeting looked nervous, too, but it was the kind of nervous Megatron preferred them to be.

He'd need to reply to Convoy after the meeting.

[AGS 22.679.01.13 10:06]

H: I take it you weren't as entertained experiencing it as I was reading about it. But don't concern yourself with going off-topic. I find your thoughts scintillating even on this more mundane subject. I am curious, however. How did 'S' *find* glitter temp-coat? Getting ahold of Cybertronian-appropriate paint in general is difficult, nevermind the more specialty options.

C: You're not wrong. He and a friend formulated it themselves! I'm trying to convince them to channel that sort of creative energy into their work, but without success.

H: I'm not familiar with your staff, but I've gotten results using competitive rewards systems to promote creativity with my own direct reports.

The lead product designers I supervise produce their most original ideas when competing for funding with each other.

C: Hm. I'm not sure what reward system would work in my case. Punishments certainly haven't made a difference. Honestly, I think I've made the problem worse. Can you tell me anything more?

H: Put 'S' and his friend in competition with each other—whether for ideas or results or something. If you like their teamwork, pit them against another team. It can be official, or unofficial. Whoever has the best result—or plan, or efficiency, etc—receives some kind of prize. The prize has to be valuable to the participants, but it certainly doesn't have to be monetary.

C: It sounds very worth trying. Though, since I just found another patch of glitter I missed in the washracks earlier, I'm about ready to try anything. Thank you for the suggestion—I'll let you know how it goes!

H: Since we're talking about this—I wondered if you might have any insight on something I'm dealing with. At work.

C: Yes?

H: Some of my subordinates seem afraid to disagree with me or offer suggestions. That doesn't help our business, and I dislike being surrounded by sycophants. How do I change that?

C: Compliments! It almost always works. Consistent praise and encouragement make employees feel more valued and more confident. Confidence helps them speak up. And even just listening can be complimentary. Of course, that method doesn't just make all discipline problems go away—hence the glitter paint.

H: Hm. I'll give it some thought.

C: Happy to help!

Optimus hadn't realized he'd been lonely until he wasn't anymore.

Talking to Hadron had been exciting from the beginning—and challenging. He'd had to put a great deal of thought into each of their exchanges: making sure all his ideas were carefully, correctly presented, navigating the complex threads of Hadron's own ideas, and trying to achieve a little degree of elegance in his writing.

That had been wonderful. Stimulating, intimidating, flattering.

This was different. They still talked often about ideas, and about Hadron's writing, but interspersed with that were more mundane discussions now. Their likes and dislikes. Who had a processor ache that day. Hadron had opened up a little bit about his work, and Optimus had been able to give him a little advice too.

Sometimes, Optimus desperately wanted to ask Hadron *why* he'd stayed neutral in the war.

But he never did.

Maybe he'd been far from Cybertron until everything was well under way. Maybe he'd—

Well.

Perhaps it was better not to know.

Megatron sat down heavily at his desk and brushed at a stray streak of slime on his cannon. He'd gone down to that accursed planet himself with the scouting party to determine if—after they pushed the Autobots out of this system—they'd be able to mine the ores from orbit or if they'd have to go after them the old fashioned way. It was the latter, to his chagrin. The bizarre swamp above the deposits would interfere with the process.

Ugh. He felt like he could recharge for days. One for every hour spent trying to free himself and his soldiers from the gelatinous pools that had tried to swallow them up. And then another few days for the fight he got into with Starscream over putting Skywarp in the brig for disobeying orders.

Skywarp had left the ship, warped down to the planet, and 'saved' Thundercracker by warping him out of the gel, wasting the work Megatron had already put into starting to pull him out. And then, naturally, Skywarp's warp drive had overheated, so the rest of them had to get out the long way around.

He was getting upset again just thinking about it. Skywarp should count himself lucky he was just in the brig!

Megatron grabbed his personal datapad out of a drawer and typed out a message.

[AGS 22.679.01.22 19:21]

H: Convoy, what do you think about love? Does it exist?

C: Kind of a small topic there... Yes, I think love exists—I wasn't aware that there was rigorous debate about that. Do you not?

H: No, I do, I do. I've seen it in action often enough. There has to be some explanation for the irrational behavior some people put themselves through. But I take it you don't subscribe to the view that 'love' is a glitch in a mech's value functions?

C: Haha, no, I'm afraid I don't. It sounds like you've had a difficult day?

H: Yes. I don't know how to explain it to you, since I can't just make an inarticulate noise of rage.

C: Well, you sound pretty articulate to me. I take it someone did something foolish because of love? Was this at work?

H: Yes, and yes. What's worse is that they don't understand why it was unacceptable.

C: Was it something like being late to work? Or did what this person did have consequences for your business?

H: It was more like...leaving work early. And getting in the way of everyone else's work. I will admit there were no serious consequences, but that was sheer luck.

C: Well, I sympathize. My work day did not go smoothly either. I must say though, that while love can make us act in strange, inconvenient ways, ultimately it's part of what makes life beautiful.

H: I wouldn't know.

C: What, really? Have you never loved anyone?

H: Not really.

There was a pause, apparently as Convoy took his time thinking. Megatron was ready to scoff at the whole conversation and put the datapad away when it chimed again.

C: What about love that isn't romantic? Have you never wanted to spend time with someone just for themselves? Or cared for someone unselfishly?

Soundwave's image popped into Megatron's processor unbidden. The first time Megatron had stooped to tend to Soundwave's wounds back in their days in the arena...and all that his second-in-command had sacrificed for him since.

H: I suppose I have. But that's an entirely different question.

C: Well, I'd say platonic love is just as much a part of what makes life beautiful. But it's strange to me to hear you say this, because I feel like there's so much passion in your writing that it must spill over into your personal life.

H: Maybe that's my trouble. I can't imagine a person being more important than principles.

It was frustrating not to be able to say "more important than *the cause*," since of course that was what Megatron meant. But 'Hadron' was a neutral. 'Hadron' had explicitly chosen not to risk his frame and spark to tear down their oppressors. 'Hadron' didn't have a cause.

C: In some ways I agree with you...I've been accused of being an idealist. But I would say that principles are important *because* of people. They're tied up in each other inextricably.

H: Have you ever fallen in love?

C: A long time ago, yes.

H: Ah. Conjunx?

Megatron wasn't sure why he'd asked that question.

But the image in his mind was so incongruous—he had to confirm it. Little neutral Convoy, with this mysterious conjunx waiting for him at home? Maybe they had holos of themselves all over wherever they lived—Skywarp carried around a holo of Thundercracker making a funny face in recharge. Megatron knew that because Skywarp had proudly shown it around the bridge the day he'd taken it. Maybe Convoy and his little neutral conjunx had photos of their ceremony, of them holding hands on vacation, of—

C: No, no. We were thinking of getting around to it, eventually, but then the war happened. She and I both changed, and the relationship ended.

H: And you believe in love even so?

C: Oh, yes. I'll always be grateful that I had that, once. It was beautiful. Though I can't say I expect to ever find another partner.

H: What, no one could live up to your lost love?

C: I'm afraid it's a much more mundane problem. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's pretty tough for a Cybertronian to 'meet new people' these days.

H: Alright, fair enough. Though I'm surprised to hear you be so cynical.

C: Well, I admit I wasn't expecting to make even a new *friend* anytime soon, but then...I met you. So maybe I'll be proven wrong in the end.

"This is a great tool of the aristocrat: they have told the world we are deceitful. So when we cry out loud and say that what is happening to us is wrong, no one believes."

– Megatron, "The Violence of Ignorance"

"If we are foolish it is because we were told to be fools, if we are ignorant it is because we were shepherded into ignorance, if we are brutish it is because we were taught to be brutes. We are what they made us. Let them look on what they've made."

– Megatron, *Towards Peace*

C: No, no. Don't you see that what you're suggesting would perpetuate the circumstances that created the war in the first place? We're talking about epistemic injustice: the powerful manipulating the knowledge of the masses for their own purposes. Megatron got that much right.

H: I don't understand.

C: He talks about this in one of his earlier essays. It was "Who Makes New Words," I believe. "The Violence of Ignorance" applies too, but the theory is mostly developed in "New Words."

H: Do you agree with Megatron's philosophy?

C: Oh, not in general. But his early work explains so much of what led to the civil war. The conclusions he leaps to I neither agree with nor condone, but the intermediate steps... His work undeniably changed the face of Cybertronian philosophy forever. Also, I think the way he explains the power dynamics of pre-war Cybertron should be a guide to any united Cybertronian society in the future.

H: Hm. I'm familiar with his work, of course. Can you explain how that essay is related?

C: Each faction, not to mention different groups of neutrals, are coming from different epistemic positions, and the resources they have for interpreting the world, and each other, are very different. And that's part of what Megatron's essay is about: how class and caste divides are worsened and perpetuated by the different hermeneutics available to both groups—as well as by the 'absent words' in the collective Cybertronian consciousness. Any new system—whether one faction's victory or a joint peace—would have to be prepared for those problems.

H: But "New Words" is about the way the caste system was self-perpetuating, so I don't see how it applies here. Neutrals and Autobots and Decepticons aren't in a shared society right now, and even if they were in the future, there isn't an overarching oppressive system interfering with the self-expression of all groups.

C: True, but another system like that could develop. Megatron was calling out the way the upper castes controlled knowledge and language—and what was considered legitimate language—to keep the lower caste controlled. It's about the cruelties in the system. It doesn't matter which system it is.

H: So, you're saying that if one faction is finally victorious—as unlikely as we, being neutrals, would consider that event to be—it doesn't matter if they're Autobot or Decepticon, they're going to inevitably replicate the caste system?

C: No, not at all. It wouldn't have to be a caste system—it might even be substantially better—but any society that results from victory will have to be very, very careful to avoid stepping down that path. I think they'd even be better off over-correcting. If the Autobots win, and the Decepticons lose, it would be a huge challenge for Optimus Prime to keep the Decepticon remnant from being cast in the role of second-class citizens in the new society. In fact, I worry it would be nearly impossible for him to achieve.

H: What about a no-win scenario?

C: Joint peace? That's easier, but still tricky. There will still be three (or more!) highly culturally disparate groups coming together. The leadership will have to be careful.

H: I was thinking more mutual destruction, but fair enough. Are you considering hermeneutical

injustice primarily?

C: Mmhm. But not only that. Testimonial injustice is relevant too—what witnesses are believed, who is considered credible, and how that intersects with our modern factions. The caste system indoctrinated its members with the idea that some of the population are by nature less trustworthy than others—and, like Megatron talks about in “New Words,” the society fails to develop ways to talk about the cruelties specifically experienced by lesser groups, thereby disadvantaging them. Preventing both has to be the first goal of a new society.

H: Can you offer me an example?

C: Imagine, in this hypothetical joint peace, a Decepticon with a business. An Autobot is considering hiring them. Possibly, when the Autobot discovers who the Decepticon is, perhaps they decide not to hire them because they don’t consider them trustworthy, in the sense of considering them not as competent because of their faction affiliation. And the reverse of course is possible. That’s a “Violence of Ignorance” style of injustice that would eat away at a new society.

H: What would you recommend to avoid these pitfalls?

C: Honestly, I think the next generation is the place to start. Building an equal society will have to start there. But then there’s education, avoiding separating the factions whenever possible, building trust. It depends on how it all happens and who’s in charge.

H: Hm. You’re assuming there will *be* a next generation.

C: Fair enough, that’s optimistic of me.

H: Is there any topic you aren’t optimistic about?

C: Ha, that’s a fair critique. I think my worries about epistemic injustice in Cybertronian society are the opposite of optimistic, but yes. Also—and Megatron doesn’t take this step at all—I think that his work has a normative ethical implication for how we should act as individuals.

H: Oh really?

C: My response to the idea of epistemic, testimonial injustice is that we should be self-correcting for bias in ourselves. So, checking that caste or dialect or function bias isn’t affecting how much we believe the person we’re talking to. It would help prevent harm to those whose credibility is unfairly reduced by bias, and advance the pursuit of truth. Community organization and self-analysis are helpful for the broader, systemic injustice he talks about in “New Words.”

H: You’re right, that really isn’t in the text. Still, very interesting.

C: Megatron changed the face of Cybertronian philosophy. I sometimes think his early work, like what we’ve been talking about, is underappreciated. It’s really overshadowed by everything that came after. I have sometimes wondered if he regrets his later work.

H: Maybe he does.

“They have stolen the words out of our mouths and left us begging for scraps of self-understanding that don’t fit us.”

[AGS 22.679.02.19 20:01]

H: I was called away and didn't see your most recent reply until now. Before I respond to your thoughts on the spark-processor problem, I've been considering how much richer our conversations would be if we weren't troubled by these delays. Would you be interested in meeting with me in the metal?

[AGS 22.679.02.19 20:33]

C: Yes. Yes I would.

Optimus wondered if his response had been *right*. Was it enough? He hadn't wanted to seem too... something, but he couldn't bear the idea that he might appear *indifferent* to the proposal. Anything more effusive was not right somehow. He could hardly correct it now—saying anything else would be ridiculous, too much.

And then, Hadron had already responded—had he been waiting?

H: I know we both value our privacy, so perhaps a friendly spaceport? Daydream Station has a small Cybertronian population. I may be presuming on the opportunities available to you, but you have mentioned traveling.

Oh.

Yes. Right. Optimus felt his spark flip a little with relief.

Then, almost immediately, dread came. This was really—was he really going to—

In desperation he responded:

C: Daydream Station sounds like a good choice. I hesitate about the logistics, however. My schedule is not very forgiving.

It was true. His schedule was...well. Megatron was hardly going to agree to a ceasefire so Optimus could have a day off.

Would he even be able to talk Prowl into allowing the security risk? How would he maintain the Convoy identity? Or could he simply arrive as himself and tell Hadron the *truth* at last?

H: I can be patient. It may be difficult to find a time and place that suits us both. Getting to engage directly with a mind like your own will be worth the wait.

Optimus smiled, feeling something relax in his spark at the compliment. There was something so sweetly warm, so indulgent, in the uncomplicated trust he put in this mech, and the apparent trust he received in return.

He hoped Hadron wouldn't regret being so considerate. Arranging this might take much longer than his friend suspected. He *would* convince Prowl. He would meet his friend—his friend!

And he could be patient, too.

Yes. Yes I would. It wasn't a very enthusiastic response, by objective measures. Soundwave had certainly pointed that out when he'd been informed of the plan. But Convoy had this way of letting his shortest statements carry the most weight, as if more words muddying up the simplicity of a concept would taint it, corrupt it. Megatron admired that.

In his imagination he flattered himself that, spoken aloud, those words would have been eager, quick, accompanied by a smile.

But then Convoy had hesitated—gone back, as if preparing Megatron for a logistical nightmare to come. How busy could a neutral really be? He wondered if he was experiencing a *polite rejection*—if the promised meeting would simply never materialize, put off over and over again by manufactured scheduling difficulties.

There was something dangerous about this involvement.

Megatron hadn't known how much he'd *wanted* an intellectual companion of this kind until he'd found one, and now that he had, he almost wished he could go back to ignorance of that desire.

Convoy had been given a disturbingly high place in his priority function.

He wondered if his last message had been too—too something. If it had made him seem too lonely. Ugh.

And then he received a reply:

[AGS 22.679.02.19 20:43]

C: I am honored that you think so. I hope I can live up to it. For myself, I have wanted to meet you since I read your essays. Though I don't think you'll have any more success talking me into nihilism, even in person.

Megatron smiled down at the datapad.

Chapter End Notes

MegOP are huge philosophy nerds and so am I XD

I'll be keeping to a posting schedule of at least one chapter a week for this fic

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“I’m delighted to finally meet you, Convoy.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Is anything more infinitely surprising than another spark?

– Hadron, “In Defense of Hope”

Conveniently, a few days later they received word that the Decepticon flagship and a small flotilla were moving into Daydream Station’s star system. Optimus knew better than to hope that they were abandoning pursuit of Axis 4’s resources. Still, for once the Decepticons were making it easier for him to find leisure time.

The Autobots tailed them, leaving the bulk of their forces at Axis 4.

He’d broached the subject of his planned meeting to Prowl as soon as Hadron suggested it, but now he, Jazz, and Ratchet were with him in the secure conference room—need-to-know only—actually making a plan to follow through. There was a twirling excitement building in his spark, alongside a silly-seeming nervousness. It was kind of trivial really, to be this excited, this scared. He hadn’t felt fear over something as normal as meeting a new friend in a millennium. What would Hadron look like? How would they recognize each other?

Prowl and Jazz had been going back and forth on the details of how they were going to disguise the ident markers on the shuttle into the spaceport, and Optimus had let his attention drift.

He tuned back in suddenly when he heard Jazz ask, “Hey, do neutrals still hardline?”

Optimus widened his optics and said, disbelieving, “Jazz, I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Well, this bit here, where he says he wants to ‘engage directly’ with ‘your mind’—that’s totally a come-on.”

No. No, no. That had been a straightforward compliment—a very nice compliment that Optimus had very much appreciated.

“We should look into it,” Jazz continued, “If neutrals still think that’s a normal practice, things could get awkward.”

There was something deeply uncomfortable about having his private messages analyzed like this. He knew it was *necessary*. He didn’t have to like it. And that—*that* was just a compliment, a very

generous bit of praise that Optimus had only reread several hundred times since he received it. And it was *not* about hardlining, *at all*.

Optimus drew himself up, looking sternly down at them. “I would never risk a security breach for my own—” Optimus struggled to find a word that wasn’t ‘pleasure,’ “—personal amusement.” He looked directly at Prowl and said, “If we determine that any part of this exercise would be too much of a risk—that it would at all endanger Autobot lives, or my own life beyond an acceptable level—then I simply will not go.”

Jazz just laughed, saying, “My mech, I don’t doubt you. But you’ll need to be ready to give an explanation that isn’t just ‘it would be a security breach.’”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Jazz,” he said, slowly, “but I must remind you that this is not a romantic assignation.”

Jazz waved the excuse away. “Alright, alright. You know we’re all happy for you, Prime.”

“Can we get back to how we’re going to make this happen?” Ratchet asked. “I have other things to do, you know.”

[AGS 22.679.02.21 08:27]

C: The expected lifespan argument is intuitively compelling—but I just can’t accept it. I strongly prefer an absolutist view. Life is valuable in itself, full stop.

H: But there are so many problems with that!

C: Yes, but there are so many problems the other way around!

H: Alright, explain then.

C: As soon as you start saying some species’ lives, generally, are more valuable than another’s—it’s just *wrong*. I know that’s not really an argument. I’m sorry I can’t be more eloquent, it’s been a long day.

H: I know the feeling. And in fairness to you—it is an argument. The entire project of ethics is based on collating our intuitions into something that sensibly coheres together. So, that’s your intuition.

C: Thanks. But intuitions can be wrong. They can even be wildly wrong. If they weren’t, we would never have seen the rise of functionism and its cruelties.

H: Heh. Assuming that the leaders of the ‘Golden Age’ simply didn’t know that what they were doing was wrong is much too generous.

C: True enough. But still—there were so many others. The middle caste, even some members of the lower caste themselves, who believed it. Who thought it felt right until they finally were shown the truth.

H: You’re still being too generous. I will admit that propaganda is powerful, that self-delusion is powerful, but that doesn’t absolve the middle castes of complicity.

C: No...but I can't help being generous in that case. It's the sort of thing that worries me—though not about this issue. I am more sure about valuing other species as equals than I am about many things. But in the case of other things, any one of us could be deluded in that way. I often ask myself, where am I going wrong? What has influenced me? Has something distorted my sense of ethics?

H: You are truly remarkable. But coming back to the point: you pointed out that the expectations—or lifespan—argument had problems for the personhood of the sick and disadvantaged. But your claim runs into exactly the same problem.

C: How so?

H: As we've established, you are as concerned for the lives of aliens as you are for Cybertronians—but only 'sentient' aliens, not organic microbes or space-borne parasitics or even the giant fan fish of Cetus IV, since it isn't just about size.

C: Giant fan fish are very beautiful.

H: They don't have brains, and you would never sacrifice a Cybertronian to save one. So, some species are equal to Cybertronians and some are not. You're using the concept of 'sentience,' as so many do, but that is a criterion without a definition. There are no viable tests or evidence or objective facts involved. But, say you decide on a definition, it's the same problem as lifespan—individuals fall through the cracks. If sentience is defined by ability to communicate, well, what about a Cybertronian with processor damage? If by intelligence, well, are stupid mechs therefore worth *less*? How smart does an individual need to be to be sentient?

C: I'm not convinced sentience can be defined, but I take your point.

H: If it's undefined then you've got the same problem as above, because relying on 'intuition' for that sort of thing is quite easy to abuse. 'Those with techanimal alt-modes just don't *feel* like real mechs' is something I've seen otherwise reasonable philosophers say.

C: I know I criticized when *you* did this—but there's always taking the macro view. So a species is sentient, not individuals?

H: Heh. That's more workable. But, as we discussed before, when you instead define personhood or sentience or whatever you want to call it as 'an individual with a spark' then all of this gets much easier.

C: How do we know a sentient organic species doesn't have something like a spark that we just can't measure?

H: We don't. And we don't know that microbes don't have something like a spark, either.

C: I wish I could say more, but I need to get to a meeting. Can we return to this later?

H: Of course. Enjoy your work day.

[AGS 22.679.02.23 15:38]

C: Can you recommend a place to meet? I'm not very familiar with Daydream Station.

H: I'll have to think about it—do you have a preference on the type of place?

C: Truthfully, I don't know. I don't socialize very much.

H: Really? I find that hard to believe. Don't you have friends?

C: I'm essentially the boss of most people around me. Our business is close knit, and I consider many of them true friends, but...it's difficult for anyone to have a night out with their boss hanging around, even if I am lenient.

H: I suppose I'm in more or less the same position. Except I intimidate most of my employees—but you already knew that. And since I don't exactly see any other Cybertronians socially... All of which is to say, I understand your situation.

C: It's nice to know I'm not the only one.

H: Let's meet in a bar. If we don't like the atmosphere we can always go elsewhere. I'll get a recommendation for one and let you know the details.

Optimus looked at the wall of paint samples Sunstreaker had dramatically unveiled in the medbay.

The Prime had known that Sunstreaker was the mech on base to approach for a good repaint, but he hadn't known that he was so extremely thorough about that role. There were more colors here than he'd had to choose from the one time Ariel had taken him to a detailer on Cybertron. Whenever Optimus needed a touch-up Ratchet usually took care of it. Often before he'd even regained consciousness from whatever had brought him to the medbay in the first place...

Sunstreaker had seemed somewhat offended that he wasn't going to be entrusted with the actual application, but a few vague words from Ratchet had given him the idea that his sample collection was needed for some kind of *top secret mission*. So Sunstreaker had nodded to Optimus respectfully and said, "I'm happy to help the cause, sir," and then gratuitously threatened Ratchet over keeping his collection properly organized.

Studying the dizzying variety of options now, Optimus said, "Ratchet, this is too frivolous. You're all going to so much trouble. How can I justify spending Autobot resources on...on..." Optimus wasn't sure *what* to call this. He'd known it would take effort, but experiencing that now—all the time, the money, the loyal service of his Autobots—it seemed too much to invest, just for one evening of his own.

They were alone in one of the medbay's private rooms. Ratchet turned away from his work to wave a wrench in the Prime's face. "Eh, eh, none of that now. You haven't had a vacation in Primus only knows how long. Longer than I've been trying to convince you to take one, that's for sure. You deserve to go on a date."

Optimus choked. "Oh, no, it's not—" He continued, using a lower volume and a more controlled pace, "It's not a date."

Ratchet just stared at him, unblinking, before sighing. "Fine. Then, you deserve to interact socially with someone who isn't under your command."

Optimus was about to object that he had, actually, but then he couldn't think of a good recent

example. In desperation, he blurted, “But I do interact with people who aren’t under my command.”

Without missing a beat, Ratchet said, “Punching Megatron in the face does not count as a social interaction.”

“I wasn’t thinking of something like that,” Optimus lied.

“And before you start in on how you could do so much more good for the Autobots if you stayed here—your stress level has a direct impact on your work and on those around you. Taking one evening off to do something for yourself *will* help the rest of us.” Ratchet patted his arm patronisingly. “I promise.”

Optimus knew Ratchet wasn’t *wrong*. Still... “It might not even go well, and after all this effort...”

“Don’t care,” Ratchet said, holding a piece of metal up to the light. “Having a new experience will do you good regardless.” And then Ratchet grinned and gave him a wink. “But just so you know, I’m not putting too much effort into this disguise. The temporary kibble won’t stand up to really acrobatic facing.”

Optimus groaned. “It’s not a date!”

“Yeah, yeah. Picked out your new paint job for the not-a-date yet?”

Optimus grumbled and turned his attention back to the extraordinary spectrum of colors. Sunstreaker had apologized for the lack of variety, actually, something about ‘on Cybertron I would have had...’ and so on. Optimus was having trouble imagining what other options there could *be*, but then he had never even been *in* a high-end detailing shop.

“No,” he said, mournful. “I don’t know how to begin. I’ve been using the same color scheme since—well, almost since I became Prime.”

Why mess with what worked? What if he picked the *wrong* colors? Something that clashed, or something tacky or old-fashioned? What would Hadron think? Did Hadron have a favorite color?

“I’m not gonna make you go through a whole sand-and-strip, we can just paint on top. That’ll last just fine through the evening—though, again, not if you get rough in the berthroom. Scratches will expose your original colors.”

“I’m not going to face him, Ratchet.”

“Hey, think positive! You might meet someone at the bar.”

Optimus heroically refrained from responding to that. He reached for an orange sample on the display. Was that a good color? Black seemed very easy, but he didn’t want to blend into the background *that* much. Gray was Megatron, so that was out. Silver, similarly rejected. Yellow was a lovely color—and gorgeous on mechs like Sunstreaker... But Optimus didn’t actually want to stand out from the crowd on this adventure. And he couldn’t just be all over *one* color, that was a dramatic statement *too*, so he’d need a complementary shade—

“Why did mechs ever change their paint for fun? This is horrendous,” he said.

Ratchet laughed at him, “Do you know, they still do?” But Ratchet put down the kibble he was constructing and came to stand beside the Prime. “Hm. The goal is to make you look as little like Optimus Prime, Leader of the Autobots as we can get, right?”

“Yes?”

“Well, then. You should obviously wear purple.”

“Ratchet!”

“What? You know I’m right. Like anyone would think ‘Hey, that looks like Optimus Prime!’ when they see someone running around in Decepticon colors.”

There was something uncomfortable even about the idea, though Optimus immediately marked that out as an inconsistency in his thinking. Colors were just colors, and their meaning depended on context. He wouldn’t be representing the Autobots, so it wouldn’t be a bizarre political statement. And anyway, there were certainly Autobots who wore purple.

“Actually, we should really bring Prowl in on this decision. Probably Jazz too. I’m sure they’ll have opinions on what’ll be more effective at making you unrecognizable.”

Prowl and Jazz crowded into the small room a few minutes later, and after a spirited discussion in which Optimus didn’t get a single word in, they decided on a muted purple—*not* the traditional Decepticon shade—with silver underplating and bright blue elements that Jazz said would draw the eye to his new, not-at-all-Optimus-Prime-like features.

Then his command staff began debating Ratchet’s designs for his ‘new’ kibble. It was...extensive. His distinctive helm profile would need to be disguised, and his smokestacks, and really, any other distinctive part of his frame. Jazz made the case for scanning an entirely new alt-mode instead, but Optimus balked at that. All of this was too much effort already.

The painting itself took place in the secondary landing bay, cleared of personnel for the occasion. The new kibble felt strange. It was partially wired in, so he could feel it, but it made his finials and smokestacks itch a bit.

At least there weren’t any mirrors.

Optimus wasn’t entirely sure he *wanted* to see this new look.

“Sunstreaker says that ‘hand-painting’ is superior somehow, but I can’t say I’m fond of it,” Ratchet said, as he re-worked a thin edge accent for the third time. “Used to be, you’d get in a painting booth, get scanned, press a button and wham! All nice and automated.”

Ratchet cursed, not for the first time, and put down the brush and exchanged it for the airbrush canister again.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, Ratchet.”

“What, impatient to get out there?”

Optimus huffed, pushing down that irrational anxiety once again.

“Eh! Quit it! What did I say about moving?”

Optimus stiffened up his servos and sighed again, but with more restraint this time. “It’s just

temporary paint, a few mistakes aren't a big deal."

Ratchet pursed his lips, focusing on his work. He murmured, "Don't you want to impress your not-a-date?"

Optimus looked at the floor. "I suppose. But what does it matter if I impress him looking like this? It isn't really *me*."

He sometimes thought about revealing his true identity to Hadron, whatever the security risks. He knew he couldn't. But if their friendship continued—if one day he could tell the truth—what would Hadron think of this farce?

"Your spark's the same, and that's what counts," Ratchet said.

Explaining the situation to Soundwave had been...awkward.

They were in Megatron's office. The ship had been orbiting an outer planet of the Axis system for nearly a full day already.

Megatron had a suspicion that Soundwave already knew everything, and was forcing him to go into detail for his own perverse enjoyment. Possibly his communications officer had *not* actually been reading Megatron's personal correspondence out of respect for his privacy—but that seemed unlikely.

Regardless, he certainly had that indescribable expression of reproach on his visored face now. Megatron knew it well.

"I'll need to disguise myself somehow, of course," Megatron said, choosing not to address Soundwave's displeasure.

And that really was the crux of the issue. Everything else had been easy enough to arrange already. Once Convoy had agreed on the location, Megatron had simply moved the Decepticon flagship into the relevant system. With the Autobots bogged down in diplomatic discussions, they could hardly get up to anything interesting if Megatron took a little side trip. Daydream Station had a sufficiently varied spaceport, so manufacturing a semi-legitimate excuse for it to the rest of his command staff had been simple. Soundwave was working on it, anyway.

He hadn't expected Convoy to make himself available to meet so soon. Megatron repressed the urge to smile, thinking of it.

Actually, he'd rather suspected Convoy wasn't going to follow up on their proposed meeting at all. He'd been prepared to stay in the system for a brief period just in case, then shift the ship's position. Best to keep the Autobots confused, after all.

Really, this was a wonderful outcome. But the actual meeting itself...obviously he couldn't present himself as *Megatron* to this naive little neutral.

But how to disguise himself?

"I can change to all over black and purple, and wear a mask," Megatron said aloud.

Immediately, Soundwave shook his head.

“Megatron: will mass-shift while in root mode.”

“I’m going to *what*?” he twisted to look at his third-in-command head on.

“Megatron: will be fitted with visor and reactive face mask.”

Megatron loomed as effectively as he knew how, which was very effectively. “I am not going to shrink myself down—”

“Megatron: will not be recognized at the size of a minibot.”

“He’s just some neutral, he won’t recognize me on sight! I agree about my face, but I am not going to *reduce myself*—”

“Soundwave: only has spare face masks in sizes for cassettes.”

Megatron growled, “No, absolutely not, I am *not* going to pretend to be a *cassette*, that is going *too far*.”

“Face masks: can be adjusted to a slightly larger frame size.”

Megatron sat down heavily behind his desk. This was going to be *humiliating*. Wandering around a public spaceport looking—looking small? He could practically hear Starscream’s insults: ‘Aren’t you adorable, Mighty Megatron?’ Not that his second-in-command was *ever* going to find out about this.

At least Convoy was probably on the small side himself, if the usual neutral demographics were anything to go by.

“False alt-mode: required. New helm: also required.”

The warlord could only glare at him. “False kibble, you mean?”

Soundwave’s posture looked smug somehow. “Suggestion: add wheels.”

“Absolutely not, think of something else,” he grumbled. “And why can’t I just use a holographic generator?”

“Holographic disguise: disrupted by touch,” said Soundwave.

“Who do you suppose would be touching me!” He waved a threatening hand at Soundwave, who continued unconcerned.

“Neutrals: more tactile than Decepticons. Convoy: may want a hug.”

The seats in this bar left Megatron's feet swinging in the air.

It was his own fault for being so much smaller than usual. Unfortunately for him, Soundwave had been right. Secrecy was paramount. Daydream Station was very public, and frequented by

Cybertronians neutral and otherwise. Looking too much like himself could lead to disaster.

At least the chairs were adjustable so he wasn't struggling to see over the table.

The Original Naughty Tornado Lounge had come recommended by Swindle, so naturally it had a ridiculous name. Coming in, Megatron had noticed a little sign next to the door that read:

Organics and inorganics welcome. *Unless your species 'doesn't believe in money.'* Height limit: 95 nitric lengths. Weight limit: 53 nitric kiloweights. *If you break our furniture, you buy our furniture.*

Inside, Megatron looked around at the various beings suspiciously. Swindle had recommended it to Skywarp, of course, not Megatron himself. How Soundwave had acquired that information, Megatron didn't know.

It was a strange feeling, to be tucking away so much mass while in his root mode. It felt natural when in his gun mode, but like this? He felt *wobbly*, and his processor kept pinging his limbs for confirmation on sensory data. It kept expecting there to be more to them. He'd done this before, of course: to get out of tight spaces, or to hide in tight spaces, and on one memorable occasion to avoid being hit by Starscream's null rays. But he'd never done it for so long.

He'd finally stopped being surprised to see something other than gray and black when he looked down at his frame. Navy. Ugh. Soundwave hadn't let him pick purple, even. At least it would be easy to get off. Soundwave had personally assisted him in the application while he was in what his third-in-command had started calling 'reduced-mode', so when he resized himself he'd just have to buff off small patches of the temp coat.

And then there was the covering on his helm that changed it's iconic shape, and an addition to his chest and abdomen that vaguely implied an altmode that wasn't a weapon. He'd had to remove his Decepticon insignia, though he'd refused to actually leave it behind: it was safely secured in his subspace pocket.

The visor and face mask had integrated well, at his smaller size, though he was regretting the choice of venue since he'd needed to expose the lower half of his face in order to *drink* at the *bar*. What an obvious oversight. He'd jumped at the sound of his new, modulated voice as he was placing an order with the extremely thin, swaying alien species behind the bar. It didn't sound strange, it just wasn't his.

At least the high grade here was good. He lifted his glass and watched the way the additives swirled in it.

The place where his fusion cannon belonged on his arm ached with phantom weight. Soundwave had wisely waited to the last minute to remind him that he couldn't go armed—at least not visibly. He had a few small weapons in his subspace, but nothing with real firepower.

Overall, he hadn't felt so off balance since the first time he'd won an arena match and he'd been ushered into the bizarrely cheerful after-party.

There were a few other Cybertronians in the establishment, but they were all in their own groups. Megatron hadn't spotted any faction emblems yet. One of Soundwave's cassettes was hiding quietly somewhere outside the bar, ready to respond to a ping and relay any problems back to the shuttle they'd taken into the space port.

He'd chosen a small table in a corner where he could discreetly watch the door with his back to the wall. Not that taking a defensive position didn't feel ridiculous, when he was less than half his

usual size.

His contemplation of his drink was interrupted by a commotion at the door. A very tall Cybertronian—at least, he appeared very tall from Megatron's current relative size—was attempting to navigate the not-quite-tall-enough door. It was actually quite funny, as the mech caught one of his helm projections on the lintel and had to bend backwards to free himself. He was a pleasing shade of purple, with calm blue and simple silver additions, and Megatron didn't see an emblem at first glance. Rather an unusual neutral, to be so tall. A quick visual measurement told him that the stranger was as tall as Megatron usually was.

Megatron watched him turn his head, apparently scanning the crowd—though it could be a bit tough to tell with a visored mech. The stranger bit his lip nervously. His gaze swept past Megatron's table, and then he startled and turned back to him. The stranger's visor brightened and his mouth stretched into a tentative smile.

Megatron's spark sank.

A few moments later, a big shadow with a soft voice said, "Hello? Are you Hadron?"

Megatron looked up at him. All the way up. Of course Convoy would be unnecessarily tall. There went Megatron's imaginary version of him as a small, naive little neutral...

"I am," he said.

"Oh," the stranger said, and held out his hand. He audibly rebooted his vocalizer. "I'm Convoy."

Megatron realized that standing up would make this more difficult, so he remained seated and reached his small hand up to clasp Convoy's.

When he looked up again Convoy was beaming at him. Megatron released his grip and gestured at the seat opposite him.

Convoy sat, carefully managing to fit his long legs under the table. No pedes swinging in the air for him. Megatron took the opportunity to examine him more closely. Simple, unadorned chest. Shoulders quite broad for a neutral. Fairly thick finials, and a crest on top of his helm. A handsome, well-sculpted mouth. Unfanged teeth, Megatron could see.

His hands looked strong and powerful, but Megatron wasn't sure why he'd come to that conclusion. They weren't unusual. Just big.

As he became aware of this perusal, Convoy's mouth twitched, and his face below his visor moved very responsively, cycling through several emotions and almost-expressions. Megatron wondered if all neutrals were that incautious with how they expressed themselves.

In their correspondence, Megatron had been the one with the power. Well, obviously—he was Megatron, Lord of the Decepticons. Any Cybertronian who wasn't Starscream or an Autobot would show deference to him—and even Autobots sometimes. But even within the fiction of the Hadron persona, he had still been the one in control. Convoy had come to him as a supplicant, as a fan, really.

It was difficult to hold on to that sense of control when he was just barely half Convoy's size. The table itself was small, too, Megatron realized now, and it exaggerated the effect. Convoy loomed over him. Megatron could have reached out and touched his face, even with his shortened reach.

But this was Convoy. The same mech he'd been speaking to for months, the *same* person. Nothing

had to change. Their dynamic would be the same.

“I’m delighted to finally meet you, Convoy.”

Hadron was very small. No, he was bigger than Bumblebee. So not *very* small. Just...small.

In his mind Optimus had imagined a mech to match the personality, the sheer presence, that Hadron had exuded in their conversations. He felt a little ashamed of being surprised. They’d never discussed appearance after all. He had no reason to think Hadron would be some huge...Optimus didn’t know. In some corner of his processor he’d imagined him as a hauler—more or less a truck like Optimus. Some manual labor type alt would have made sense with some of his philosophy, though not with his apparent level of education. Though, like Optimus himself, Hadron easily could have picked erudition up later. And smaller bots were no less likely to be intelligent and interesting. He knew better than to think that way, that was for sure.

Anyway, most everyone was small compared to Optimus. He’d gotten used to that, and to the awkwardness of having to talk down to others and to maneuver in too-small spaces. Like this table, which was a little low for his legs to be comfortable. He thought it could be adjusted—like most of the furniture in The Original Naughty Tornado Lounge—but Hadron’s chair was already pretty high up and Optimus decided not to mention it.

Optimus wondered if there was another ‘Naughty Tornado Lounge’ out there in the galaxy somewhere.

He hadn’t been in a proper bar in a long time. Certainly not one that served energon.

It had been overwhelming when he’d walked in. So many species, and so many Cybertronians he didn’t know—he hardly ever encountered Cybertronians he didn’t recognize anymore. The graduated height bar, the tables and chairs all set at different levels, and the willowy, swaying forms of the native Lilili who wove between tables guiding heavy trays on little anti-grav units. The tagline on the door had read, ‘Our Drink Menu Is Galactic,’ in several languages.

Very much out of his comfort zone.

He was just saying, “I’m glad to meet you, too—” when one of the waiters approached their table.

When it spoke it produced a pretty, lilting, musical noise that was quickly followed by a slightly stilted translation into Cybertronian coming from a little speaker on it’s lapel.

It said, very quickly, “Welcome, Cybertronian. If your species has been misidentified, please correct. If your language has been misidentified, please correct. Please inform of any dietary restrictions. All patrons drink at their own risk. Please refer to our legal indemnity policy regarding accidental interspecies ingestibles poisoning. Would you like to try the energon version of our famous Naughty Tornado?”

“Um,” Optimus said.

Hadron laughed, in his slightly deep, just lightly rough voice, and gestured at his own drink. “I went with something simpler, but I’m told the energon version of the house special is popular.”

Looking at their menu sounded like a waste of time to Optimus, so he said, “Yes, I would like, uh, a Naughty Tornado please.”

The lilting noise came again, and then, “Wonderful choice, right away.” And the waiter moved off.

Optimus turned to Hadron and mused, “I wonder if ‘Naughty Tornado’ is some kind of mistranslation.”

His companion smiled, “It’s not. I checked.”

Hadron seemed to have a retractable facemask, like Optimus’s battlemask. Optimus’s own was retracted, and the mechanism was disguised—in the same way as the other more obviously military elements of his frame—so it would seem like he didn’t have one at all. ‘Convoy’ wasn’t supposed to have a facemask. No one knew what Optimus Prime’s mouth looked like, of course, so the real thing was disguise enough. He hadn’t gotten used to the constant brushing of air over his lower face. It made his lips tingle. Hadron’s facemask was retracted now, too, revealing a strong, well-defined mouth.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in a bar,” Optimus said, awkwardly. And then, trying to exercise unfamiliar control over the expression of his mouth, “It’s so easy to think of things to say to you when we’re writing, but in person somehow, I don’t know what to talk about.”

It didn’t help that his own voice sounded strange in his audials under the influence of the voice modulator. It made it odd to plan out sentences, because he wasn’t sure what kind of tone would come out.

And the first question on his mind—“So, you’re smaller than I expected?”—would have been rude.

Hadron hummed thoughtfully, “Somehow I don’t think that’ll be a problem.” Then he smiled. “But if you want a prompt, we could always continue our conversation about interspecies ethics.”

Optimus laughed. “Not one for starting off with something easy, are you.”

Hadron raised his glass in a salute. “Never. So, when it comes to the lifespan question, I think it comes down to whether you value rarity or permanence. The ‘permanent’ Cybertronian, or the ‘rare’ organic.”

Optimus nodded, “In the sense that the organic may not be rare as a representative of its species, but as an individual, it’s span of existence in the universe is a limited commodity.”

“Exactly. And the question works even if you ignore the afterspark.”

“Well, I don’t think you can assign value to lives with a scarcity model at all—individuals can’t be considered as commodities,” Optimus said.

“It was your idea that they had more value for being rare.”

They continued talking, before being interrupted by the arrival of Optimus’s ‘Naughty Tornado.’ There was an eponymous ‘tornado’ pattern of color swirled inside the drink, as well as what looked like a thin sheet of shale leaning out of the glass. Curious, Optimus took the little piece of shale and held the high-grade-dipped end up to his mouth for a nibble.

Hadron asked, “Good?” and Optimus murmured, “Yes,” after taking a first cautious sip of the drink.

After that, their conversation wandered from drink to drink and topic to topic—still as engaging as their on-grid conversations, but more casual, easy.

Hadron came up with the most interesting hypotheticals. Looking thoughtful, the small mech said, “Alright, let’s see what you think of this. Something vaguely similar came up at work, and I thought of you. Imagine that my community desperately needs platinum—yes, ridiculous, I know—and there is a supply of platinum not far away.” Hadron continued, “However, another rival community is trying to get to the platinum first. My community knows it would be cheaper and faster to initiate a hostile takeover of the business that owns the supply of platinum, and it would keep the other community from getting to it first.”

Optimus took a leisurely sip of his second drink and said, “Where are you going with this?”

Hadron nodded and said, “My question for you is, do the ethics change for you if the business is owned by organics or by Cybertronians?”

Optimus frowned. It was a complicated example. He said, “I can’t even parse it, because you wouldn’t make that kind of bargain without investigating other options first. That would just be wasteful.” He thought suddenly of what Megatron wanted to do to Axis 4, and shivered. “I don’t think it makes a difference that they’re organic, though. The real problem is whether the need for platinum is so great that stealing it is justifiable.”

“I suppose,” Hadron said.

“In this scenario, is it not possible to just *buy* the platinum outright? Or to try to outbid your competitors? Or outwit them somehow? Because you’d have to establish that in the scenario before you can worry whether stealing from organics or from Cybertronians is worse,” Optimus finished, with a sip of his drink.

“You’re missing the point,” Hadron grumbled, but he looked thoughtful. “Still, outbidding would solve the problem neatly...”

“Assuming the community has the funds, and so forth. I think I know what you’re trying to ask, but I’ll need a more specific use case to work with.”

Hadron was resting his face on his chin and staring into the middle distance. Finally he replied, “I’ll work on it. But enough of that. Do you still like that drink the second time around?”

Optimus smiled, “Definitely. Do you want to try some?” And he pushed the ‘Naughty Tornado’ to Hadron’s side of the table.

Hadron frowned at it dubiously, before taking a tentative sip. His visor brightened a bit. “That actually isn’t bad.”

And Hadron ordered one for himself the next time their waiter came by.

There was something very disconcerting about being talked *down* to—not that it was Convoy’s fault he was so tall. Megatron knew that sort of thing didn’t really *matter*, it was an illusion of superiority, not the reality of it, so he made an effort and ignored it.

Convoy was amusingly nervous, but refreshingly irreverent all the same. It was such a relief. No ‘Lord Megatron this’ and ‘Lord Megatron that’—not even the angry but slightly fearful way the Autobots would say his name. He’d earned his reputation, his position, his honors—he *liked* them, too—but when Convoy said, “Hadron, would you like another drink?” it was *casual* in the nicest way. He was just a person, not a myth. It would have been even better if Convoy had been saying his *real* name with so much familiarity, but of course that was not to be.

The evening was like one great daydream. He felt like he’d slipped into someone else’s life, just for a night. No consequences, no one depending on him. It was relaxing.

The drinks were contributing to that, too, probably.

Though it had been frustrating trying to come up with that bizarre hypothetical scenario based on a *business deal* and not on *combat*. He could do it just fine when they were writing to each other—he had time to fine tune things then. But here, obviously he couldn’t say: I’ve found it’s more efficient to simply conquer smaller organic species rather than negotiate with them. Still, Convoy had something of a point...

They were on the third round of drinks, and Megatron had been getting a little overly poetic about the elegance of Tangent’s argument in his Fourth Treatise, when Convoy, his mouth pursed into the most interesting shape, said, “You’re wonderful.”

Once the words were out, Convoy immediately captured his bottom lip with his teeth, tugging on it. It looked soft. It took Megatron a little too long to look away for some reason. After his auditory processing caught up on the conversation, he startled and, without thinking, said, “So are you.”

He was considering walking that statement back, but the way Convoy gasped a little and smiled was very gratifying. And apparently it was enough encouragement to convince Convoy to start saying quite a lot of other things out loud, like, “You’re so smart—and you approach philosophy with such creativity, ways of solving problems I’d never considered before. I was so flattered when you replied to me that first time—and you’re funny, too, I think—I always look forward to your messages—”

But Convoy was gesticulating dangerously with the hand holding his drink, so Megatron reached out and grabbed his wrist, bringing it gently back down to the table.

“Oh,” Convoy said.

Megatron was drawing back his hand, brushing gently over Convoy’s fingers, but Convoy released his grip on the glass and turned his palm up into the touch and gripped him in return.

It felt...very nice. Convoy was stroking over the back of his fingers with his thumb in the most mesmerizing manner.

Megatron looked down just to be sure, but, no, he wasn’t confused. They were holding hands.

“Oh,” he said, softly.

Convoy was smiling, tilting his head, not looking at Megatron’s face. “I, I wasn’t expecting—”

“Yes,” Megatron said. “Yes.”

Convoy squeezed his hand, carefully, and Megatron shifted his position and brushed his fingertips over the other mech’s wrist. He responded in kind, drawing a new pattern with brushes of his thumb against the back of Megatron’s hand.

They were quiet for some time after that, Megatron staring fixedly as Convoy bit his lip again and looked anywhere but at Megatron.

Finally, Convoy coughed and returned to their conversation. “So, you don’t think that the Third Treatise poses problems for Tangent’s later work?”

After that, they talked at length about the contradictions among Tangent’s writings: they agreed, they disagreed, they laughed. All the while, Convoy cradled his hand in his. Megatron didn’t pull away.

The next morning, Megatron was on the bridge of the *Nemesis* reading an update from Soundwave. Good news.

As soon as he’d met his third-in-command at the shuttle to leave Daydream Station, he’d explained his new idea. He’d been somewhat drunk at the time, so he’d had to explain it again early that morning to clarify certain elements—but now everything was in motion.

The future was bright, the war was going to be won, he was his normal size again, and he had held hands with Convoy for a full hour the night before.

What a wonderful universe.

Megatron stood up from his throne, tall and proud. Spontaneously, he grinned.

He turned his delighted expression on Starscream standing next to him, who dropped the datapads he was carrying in confusion. “There’s been a change of plans, Starscream,” he drawled. “Scrap the invasion strategy, we’re taking a more *creative* approach.”

Megatron considered for a moment, and then added, “Summon Swindle to the bridge. He might come in useful.”

At the same time, Optimus was in the medbay, having his over-energized circuits tended to by Ratchet.

“Shoulda come to me as soon as you got back, but *no*, can’t let someone take care of you, you’ve got to suffer in silence like some processor-damaged martyr—”

Prowl reset his vocalizer, pointedly, and Ratchet’s murmuring quieted down. Prowl had been trying to deliver an update on the tactical situation.

“As I was saying, Prime, some of the smaller Decepticon ships moved into an unusual formation back in the Axis system last night,” Prowl said.

Optimus was handed a datapad with a tactical schematic.

“But it’s quite strange—by this morning, they had all returned to their previous positions. We may

learn more once we're on the spot. The *Nemesis* appears to be powering up it's engines for a jump, and I recommend following them."

"Hm. A mystery. But I agree, let's prepare the *Ark* to move out. I won't be able to join you on the bridge until Ratchet is done with me though," Optimus concluded. His helm ached awfully. At least all the strange extra kibble was gone again. With a sideways glance at Ratchet, Optimus added hopefully, "That is, unless there's an emergency."

"Ep ep! I don't care what kind of emergency you've got, you are not getting out of your mandatory refresher course on safe engex consumption!"

Optimus sighed. Prowl smiled at him sympathetically, but didn't offer assistance. Wise bot.

Prowl left, and Ratchet continued to work on helping his self-repair along. As Optimus waited, his personal datapad chimed from within his subspace. Optimus retrieved it and checked his messages.

A medical machine began trilling in a high pitched tone. Almost immediately, Ratchet said, "Would you try to keep your vitals down? What's got you so excited anyway?"

Still reading, Optimus replied, "Hadron sent me a message."

"Ha! Date go well then? Didn't drink all this engex out of loneliness?"

Optimus shoved at him playfully, but didn't really pay attention.

[AGS 22.679.02.25 08:56]

H: I enjoyed meeting you. You are even more engaging in person than you are by letter. I don't think I've shared a more stimulating evening in a thousand years.



Coppernickels created this amazing illustration of a scene from this chapter! Go show them some love on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#).

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

C: Do you still think love is a kind of processor glitch?

[AGS 22.679.02.27 13:55]

H: Alright, alright. Even if I accept that ‘beings without sparks,’ let’s call them, can be equal to Cybertronians, I still don’t think it’s morally wrong to value your own species’ survival over another’s. And I think that applies beyond us—if the Firandrans needed to attack a group of Cybertronians to preserve their species, I would be mad at them, probably, but I couldn’t call that immoral.

C: But species survival is more of an edge case.

H: Edge cases are the most useful for exploring ethical questions *and* it isn’t an edge case for Cybertron. It isn’t an edge case at all.

C: Yes. You’re right, it’s a very real scenario.

H: If I had the chance to somehow create a hotspot on Cybertron again at the expense of some other species, I would absolutely take it.

C: I see your point—but no. I wouldn’t. Definitely not if we’re talking about lives. Maybe that makes me soft-sparked.

H: Are you the sort who balks at lying, even for the greater good?

C: No... I can be practical and utilitarian. But I don’t fully subscribe to the doctrine of double effect, if that’s what you mean. Some small ‘evils’ can be morally allowed in exchange for great ‘goods’—but there are limits. Ethics can’t be reduced down to whatever produces the ‘best’ outcome.

H: I disagree with you there. But regardless—I don’t think you’re actually a pacifist, so what if some other species were actively attacking Cybertron?

C: Self-defense is different.

H: I don’t really see how, when it’s the macro scale of war between planets. You’d be fighting to protect your species, at the expense of some other species. Isn’t that the same?

C: It’s not the same! It’s like the parts-harvesting case.

H: Ah, so you like virtue ethics then? Ready to embrace practicality until it runs up against your rules?

C: You don’t really think it would be morally acceptable to sacrifice one healthy mech for the parts to save five dying mechs?

H: No...though I almost want to say yes just to scandalize you. But let's take life and death out of it—what about Cybertron making a disadvantageous trade deal with some other species? And we're being cheap or otherwise swindling them somehow.

C: I'm not thrilled with that scenario, but I think it could be ethically permissible. But there's a utilitarian argument against it anyway—the same argument in favor of honoring surrenders. The long term consequences of being dishonest in interplanetary dealings outweighs the benefits of getting a better deal once.

H: What about on an individual basis: you can save a Cybertronian or a sentient alien, but you can't save both. Which do you choose?

C: I don't know. Context would be important, but I think I would have to choose at random.

H: Okay, so if context is important—what if the Cybertronian is close to you?

C: But that's a very different case. I could also be close to a sentient alien, you know.

H: Hm. Alright, here's what I mean: you wouldn't fault a mech who chose to save their lover over some other being, Cybertronian or otherwise, correct?

C: No, I suppose not. But that's different. Lovers and friends have a sort of moral obligation to each other.

H: You're such a virtue ethicist. But yes, I think I would agree. That special relationship creates mutual obligations of varying degrees. Now, I would argue that fellow Cybertronians are all in a relationship to us like that. We have obligations to each other as fellow members of the species.

C: Ah. I'm not sure I agree...but I think I understand your position better.

Unfortunately, the Decepticons threw Optimus's good mood into a tailspin within the following few days. Their ships alternated between engaging in bizarre maneuvers, and more or less staying put. High Command, with the assistance of Special Ops, was trying aggressively to discover the reason—whatever plan Megatron had cooked up this time, it didn't follow any previous pattern, or any sensible military strategy.

And while they were in the midst of increasingly bogged down negotiations with the Ongredix, the Autobots could hardly take preemptive action. His guide had been very sympathetic, but apparently unable to speed things along. It was two weeks of parties and ritual rites before Optimus was finally allowed to meet with the primary negotiator representing the planetary government in person. And hadn't *that* been a strange meeting, full of ritual ointments, which were fortunately harmless.

Ratchet had checked him over afterwards, to be sure it was safe for Cybertronians. His recent repaint made scanning him troublesome, but the medic had given him a clean bill of health.

At least the Decepticons appeared content to dance around in the outer edges of the system for no one knew what purpose.

The only bright spot was when Sunstreaker and Sideswipe burst excitedly into his office and

triumphantly presented him with the report of their successful field test of the new paint they'd been working on: the anti-targeting topcoat, designed to disrupt laser guidance. Sideswipe had actually been wearing it, and, Optimus had to admit, the holographic effect was extraordinary. It almost hurt to look at. And, as the science team had confirmed, it was extremely effective in the field. The twins deserved a commendation.

There was another bright spot in his life, though Hadron wasn't a bright spot so much as a terrifying supernova...

Optimus felt drawn in as if by the sheer gravity of his friend's personality. He wasn't sure what he would do without it, now. And they'd only known each other for a few months.

While his daily duties didn't involve as much killing and death at the moment as usual, they did involve stress, and the retreat of being able to contact his friend at the end of each day was addictive. Optimus had tried, just as an experiment, going a day without contacting him. It had been shockingly difficult, and then Hadron had been worried as well as slightly offended not to hear from him, and that had been worse.

[AGS 22.679.02.28 16:42]

C: If I can be honest for a moment, I had been quite lonely before I met you. I don't think I realized how much.

H: I don't see why. Anyone who doesn't appreciate you properly is a fool.

C: It's not that. I feel...appreciated. It's just, I haven't been close to anyone in such a long time.

H: I know exactly what you mean.

The memory of Convoy smiling and ducking his head shyly kept rising up in Megatron's imagination. It was such a strange feeling. He considered going to Soundwave for counsel, but...well, what would he know about it? He wasn't any more experienced than Megatron.

There wasn't anything *special* about Convoy. Not obviously, at least.

He wasn't polished to a high shine. He wasn't especially strong or ferocious. His color scheme was handsome, tasteful, but hardly unusual. He wasn't even ornamented with symbols of aggression like the more impressive of the other gladiators back before the war. He didn't, as far as Megatron was aware, have some devastating level of skill in combat. Megatron probably could have crushed him as easily as venting—not something he usually found *attractive*. Not without other inducements, anyway. He didn't even have wings! He was some kind of grounder, but big, like a truck—which didn't remind Megatron of anything or *anyone*, and therefore wasn't appealing in any way.

Not that Convoy didn't have good qualities. He had very many good qualities. But plenty of mechs

were tall with big, strong hands and plush, expressive lips.

It didn't make sense that one meeting with this mech would have him haunting Megatron's every inattentive moment.

And Megatron wasn't even upset, because it was all so wonderful.

It was wonderful because Convoy evidently liked *him*. Convoy even liked him when he was a miniature, totally disguised version of himself.

Megatron kept thinking about the way Convoy bit his lip, the earnest way he listened to Megatron, the gentle care he used when he moved his frame around in a slightly-too-small space. And most of all, the things he said: the funny things, that had made Megatron smile; the strangely honest things, that had made Megatron smile in a completely different way; and the extraordinarily insightful things, that had given Megatron the idea that would keep the Autobots out of Axis 4 permanently.

Convoy *was* special. He was brilliant, and nice, and generous, and he thought Megatron was wonderful.

But what was Megatron supposed to *do* about it?

They'd met once. Then they'd talked nearly every day for weeks. The conversation was as stimulating as ever, but now Convoy was sending little, affectionately vulnerable messages, like gifts, and Megatron was hoarding every one of them. He had them all saved in a highly encrypted file.

Ugh. He'd have ridiculed anyone else he'd caught doing something like this.

He needed a plan of attack.

Convoy was shy—which Megatron for some reason now found delectable instead of annoying—so he would need to take the initiative. Yes.

Hm.

Megatron got comfortable on his berth and set to work on his datapad. It was more difficult than he'd expected to come up with an opening line. He and Convoy had most recently been discussing the merits of asceticism, and that was...not helping. Self-denial was not a theme that segued nicely into affection.

Still. He was Megatron. He would be bold!

~~H: Have you considered embracing hedonism?~~

~~H: I want to spike you.~~

~~H: What's your favorite fantasy?~~

~~H: I imagine you'd suck spike amazingly.~~

~~H: Holding hands with you was the most erotic experience I'd had in~~

No. No, no. Not that. Not any of those. Too crude, too ridiculous, or too revealing, and really, too specific—since he couldn't even be sure they'd be compatible. Some discreet mass-shifting would help with that, but within realistic limits only.

But what would Convoy *like*? He liked affection—Megatron knew that already—but how to strike the right balance...

[AGS 22.679.03.01 20:33]

H: Tell me, would you have let me kiss you that night at the bar?

Optimus ought to have been getting ready for recharge, but instead he was having a very late meeting with Prowl: last-minute requisitions for the implementation of the twins' new invention.

Prowl was just walking out of his door when Optimus opened the message. He immediately wheezed as his confused vents tried to cycle air in both directions at once. Several minutes after that—once he'd convinced Prowl that yes, he was fine, really, but no, he definitely did not need to go to the medbay—he reread the message from Hadron just to be sure he hadn't misinterpreted it.

Would you have let me kiss you that night at the bar.

His spark was racing, and now that he'd begun to process it, he was switching between euphoria and anxiety.

Maybe he did need the medbay.

It wasn't a *surprise* exactly. Hadron had—Hadron had smiled at him, and taken his hand—but they hadn't *said* anything. Nothing had been confirmed, or discussed. There'd been vague, vague allusions to it that had made Optimus's spark feel all warm and confused and thrilled, but neither of them had actually admitted what was happening.

He needed to respond with—something! What should he say?

It was a question, which was helpful—Primus below, he hadn't been so nervous since he was a newbuild.

[AGS 22.679.03.01 20:56]

C: Yes.

And then, feeling driven, like his spark was pushing past his processor to get the words down and send them off, he sent:

C: I would love to be kissed by you.

Like he was in a dream, Optimus left his office for his berthroom and collapsed on the berth. Everything—*everything* about this had just become very complicated. He felt trouble looming in the background of his processor menacingly: what would his officers say? What would *Hadron* say, when he eventually found out who 'Convoy' really was? Would a neutral ever consider a serious relationship with the leader of the Autobots? Could *he* reasonably condone becoming—

becoming involved with someone who would inevitably be a security risk?

But he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

Optimus whispered into the quiet of his room, "I would love to be kissed by you."

[AGS 22.679.03.02 16:27]

C: Do you still think love is a kind of processor glitch?

H: I must admit, your arguments in our conversation a few months ago were compelling. But I think I'll need more first hand evidence before I can draw a true conclusion.

C: Oh? How do you plan to get this first hand evidence?

H: Can't you guess?

[AGS 22.679.03.03 18:02]

H: Are you familiar with what Veda says about one-on-one conversation? It's not their most famous work.

C: I can't say I am.

H: It's a bit obscure. I never used to put much stock by it.

C: You've changed your mind?

H: Yes. Since I met you.

C: Oh?

H: They talk about pairs—intellectual couples—as the source of new ideas. We were talking about the spark as the origin of 'new energy' so to speak, but Veda talks about the processor of an individual as being a closed loop, or a single room. The individual—spark or processor, as you prefer—as they try and philosophize or create or generate any kind of ideas, they just spin around the same track, running the same race over and over again. The idea being that the individual is trapped in their own mind, and their creativity is therefore limited, and therefore, the best, most unique ideas, come from the interaction of two sparks, together.

C: So, two or more minds are required for the best result?

H: Just two. One-on-one conversation is supposed to be the most intense, the most creative. While three is the most stable.

C: And you didn't used to believe in this?

H: No. And I don't exactly agree now—but I used to be of the school that the purest concepts come from the singular thinking of the spark—not even the processor, which is what most argue. I used to think that *because* the spark is in a closed room of its own, or it can be at least, therefore the ideas generated in those circumstances are the most unique, the most unbiased.

C: The mysteries of the universe can be solved by shutting down your sensory suite and thinking them through?

H: Yes, yes. Though I admit Cartesian's project was a little ridiculous. But I was inclined that way—in a way much more friendly to the value of experiences over 'the uninfluenced spark,' though. I didn't think that the addition of another spark—something, as you would say, with its own complementary generative power—would make such a difference.

C: I hope this is a good thing?

H: Oh, yes. You've shown me that it's true—that sharing ideas outside of my own 'closed loop' and receiving new ones from outside *is* generative. You've given me so many new ideas. I haven't written like this—with so much drive—since I was quite young.

C: You can't know how happy I am to hear that—though it shouldn't be a surprise that I'm always eager to see more of your writing.

H: I didn't know how hungry I was for conversation of this quality before. You've forced me to do the work to understand myself, so that you can understand me, and to transform my thinking, so that I can understand you.

C: I'm honored. I have sometimes wondered if I'm the one getting the most benefit out of these conversations.

H: Not at all. I think we complement each other perfectly. Just imagine what we might accomplish together.

[AGS 22.679.03.06 22:12]

C: Are you awake?

H: Mostly. You're up later than usual.

C: Ah, well, don't let me keep you from your recharge.

H: No, no. What's keeping you awake?

C: It's nothing. I was just thinking about you.

H: Tell me more. What about me is so interesting?

C: The way you smile when you know you're winning an argument.

H: You've been losing recharge meditating on my smile?

C: I want to know what it would feel like.

H: What, smiling?

C: No...I was thinking about what it would feel like to kiss you when you're smiling like that.

H: Do you know, I'm feeling inclined to satisfy your curiosity.

C: I'm afraid I can be very curious...

H: Oh really? Are there many other parts of my frame you want to kiss?

C: I may have been making a list.

H: I like the sound of that. Name the place you want to kiss me, and then we'll see if I'll let you.

Optimus had never had a whirlwind romance before.

Not that this exactly qualified. They'd been talking for months before there was any suggestion of a romantic element between them. His last serious relationship had actually progressed faster.

Still, it felt like a whirlwind romance.

Something about it was...monumental. Maybe it was how extremely inconvenient it all was. Hadron still didn't know his true identity, and unfortunately he had to agree with his command staff's assessment that he couldn't tell him—at least not yet.

And then there was the inconvenience of actually getting to see him. Hadron had asked him to meet again, and Optimus had—inevitably, irresistibly—said yes, but he had no idea when he'd actually be able to go.

A meeting of his 'inner circle' was on again, and Prowl and Jazz were going back and forth on that very issue.

"The Decepticons are hardly going to saunter over to Daydream Station to suit the Prime's social calendar," Prowl was saying.

Ratchet sighed, "So we manufacture some excuse to go back next time there's a lull in the negotiations."

Jazz's perspective called for brazen stealth, as usual: "We can just smuggle Prime onto a different ship, so we don't have to take the Ark outta the system. Easy."

Optimus had been choosing to stay out of the fray as yet, still somewhat uncomfortable from wondering if Prowl, and most likely Jazz, had been reading his messages. He wasn't sure he wanted to know if they had been.

Reluctantly, he said, "This is not an urgent issue. I can wait until the logistics are easier."

They all looked at him, knowingly.

"Uh huh," Ratchet said.

Prowl sighed, “The reality is that we may not have a better opportunity than this. For whatever reason, the Decepticons haven’t initiated armed conflict over Axis 4—though we all agree it is only a matter of time. As you know, I’ve been taking this lull as an opportunity to revise and fine-tune various management and personnel issues aboard ship, but it’s also the best time for you to—”

“—indulge in a little romance!” Jazz interjected, with a suspiciously salacious grin.

Before Optimus could object, Ratchet jumped in, “Speaking of which, I think we need to bring Sunstreaker in on the secret.”

“What?”

“I do okay with painting, but if you want to look your best, he’s the mech to go to. Also, if you’re considering interfacing with this mech, then you will need to paint *everything*.”

Optimus briefly contemplated the ceiling of the secure conference room where he’d made so many life and death decisions over the years.

He wasn’t sure at first what was so uncomfortable about it. When he’d become Prime, he’d known that privacy would no longer be something he was entitled to. And these mechs were his friends, even if they were also his subordinates, and he’d discussed sex and interfacing with them before—not usually in an official venue, but he wasn’t actually prudish about this sort of thing. What was bothering him was something about the intimacy of it all...the preciousness of his feelings for Hadron, and the sense of those feelings being dragged into the light.

Mastering himself, Optimus decided, “Yes. We’ll bring Sunstreaker in. But not until we’ve arranged the details. Prowl, please work on an excuse to take the *Ark* to Daydream Station. You’re right that the Decepticons are going to attack eventually, and I would rather have to rush back on the *Ark*, than be trapped on a shuttle trying to get through a firefight.”

Hadron had already told Optimus that this week would be one where he could make his way to Daydream Station, so only two days after that meeting with his staff, Optimus was back in the secondary landing bay, transforming into Convoy.

The bay had been cleared, and he and Jazz would taking the shuttle down to the planet as soon as he was ready.

Sunstreaker had replaced Ratchet this time on painting duty, and it was a fundamentally different experience.

At that moment, Optimus was sitting so Sunstreaker, focused, serious, and diligent, could work on his helm. Optimus could feel the paint application—sort of. Sunstreaker was working on the temporary additions to his plating. His temporary kibble was wired in, so he did receive sensations from that plating, but it wasn’t...quite right.

First of all, Ratchet hadn’t manufactured high quality plating for this project, so it was giving him far from a full suite of sensory functions. The proprioception was off, and the touch perception wasn’t very precise. A lot of it was just spoofing the sensory suite in his actual frame, so he was feeling input as if it was on his true plating, except muted, and translated from a shape that didn’t match. Ratchet had put more effort into certain areas that would be moving more often, like the

plating on his shoulders, so it wasn't awful, by any means, but it wasn't exactly comfortable.

"It's strange, seeing you with a different helm, sir," Sunstreaker murmured as he came around to the Prime's other side.

"Is it?"

"You look more like a mech instead of a myth," he said absently. Then Sunstreaker hummed, and set down the container of white paint. "I'm done with the primer, and since we did a light sand it should adhere nicely. We'll need to do two coats on everything, even the new plating, to make sure the finish matches. Have you considered how you want the accent lines done?" And the yellow mech passed him the datapad of samples again.

Optimus had looked through some of it—a seemingly endless catalogue of different designs and color schemes modeled by all kinds of mechs, some of them Autobots, some clearly pre-war.

He handed it back. "I honestly don't know how to choose. Would you decide?"

Sunstreaker huffed, and stepped back, looking critically over Optimus's frame. Then he made a face. He opened his mouth like he was going to speak but shook his head.

Finally, he said, "Sir, forgive me if I'm overstepping here, but Ratchet explained that you're going on...an undercover date."

The primer was still drying, and he was the Prime, so Optimus resisted the urge to cover his face with his hands. "Yes. I apologize for—well. Letting you think something else, the last time. It must seem frivolous."

But Sunstreaker shook his head, and visibly composed himself, "No, sir, of course not. But, sir, if you *are* going on...a date, we'll need to paint your array to match."

Optimus stared at him. He had *known* that, *of course*, Ratchet had even mentioned it, but it had slipped right out of his processor in the past two days.

"Unless you don't intend to interface." Sunstreaker was looking at him with almost comical seriousness. He asked solemnly, "Do you intend to interface, sir?"

Optimus realized suddenly that he hadn't had this long of a conversation with Sunstreaker in many years. Nevermind a conversation that was so personal. He took a deep vent and tried to relax a little bit.

He didn't know what it was about Hadron that had him reacting so defensively whenever he had to discuss him. Was it the war? He hadn't had any kind of romance since before he became Prime. There had been dalliances, and he had interfaced with friends, but there hadn't been a *relationship*. Had he changed so much?

But Sunstreaker was trustworthy. He knew that.

Trying to seem less awkward, he said, "Yes. Yes, I do intend to interface. But you really don't have to help with—"

But Sunstreaker was shaking his head again, still serious, "If you're uncomfortable, I can give you some instructions and go. But let me assure you, Prime, I am a professional. You'd be in good hands."

Optimus wouldn't have really considered this a few months ago, but...

"Alright," he said.

And Sunstreaker was right. Optimus was in good hands.

He maintained that focused seriousness throughout: calmly asking Optimus to open his panel like it was an everyday occurrence, giving him simple instructions to pressurize his spike without a hint of either embarrassment or desire, steadily explaining the process to Optimus in a scrupulously professional tone.

And Optimus actually began to relax, for all he was sitting, array totally on display, in a cargo bay with one of his subordinates.

Sunstreaker was using a different kind of thin primer on top of the current colors on his spike. He was being very gentle, so focusing on the ceiling was enough to keep Optimus from getting charged up. The experience was almost soothing, really.

"Would you like to keep the current design in the new colors, or do you want something different?" Sunstreaker asked without looking up from his work.

"I honestly hadn't thought about it."

"How did you decide on the current scheme?"

Optimus chuckled, "I didn't. The design came with the new frame when I became Prime."

Sunstreaker stood up and grabbed the datapad of examples, handing it to him. "Well, sir, you'll have plenty of time to think about it while I'm working on the first coat of color on the rest of your frame. There are sample array designs in the very last section." Then, moving to open one of the paint colors, he added, "Just leave your spike pressurized so the primer doesn't get marred."

Optimus tried to think about it, looking through the different mockups. He'd seen some very appealing decoration on the spikes and valves of partners over the years, and he knew about some pre-Cybertronian styles, too—what was considered adventurous, what was more sedate. But it was one thing to know what was appealing on someone else, and quite another to decide what you wanted for yourself.

He'd given up on choosing the way his frame looked a long time ago. Even before the Primacy, Orion Pax hadn't had the funds for any extravagant changes to what he'd been created with.

There was one design... It was maybe a little too racy, but Optimus kept coming back to it. He turned the datapad around and showed it to Sunstreaker. "Do you think this would be good?"

Sunstreaker frowned up at him from where he'd started work on the Prime's lower limbs, looking at the screen.

Optimus asked again, "It's maybe a little *too* forward—"

Sunstreaker frowned harder. "Sir, are you nervous?"

Optimus fidgeted. "You don't think it will look nice?"

"I think it'll look great, sir." But Sunstreaker just frowned again, setting down his paintbrush. "I'm sorry, but I have to ask. Are you sure you want to do this?"

Optimus was confused. “The painting?”

“No, the mission.”

“The mission?”

“You’re...planning to interface with someone while undercover?”

“Oh, oh no.” Optimus struggled for words. “Sunstreaker, I—it’s not a mission. I’m not, uh—” Prostituting himself for the sake of the Autobots, which was apparently what Sunstreaker thought he was doing. “I’m not doing this for the war.”

He hadn’t had to explain this situation from the beginning to anyone yet. Prowl and Jazz had known from the first, and they’d filled Ratchet in on the details, and then they’d all seen some of the message logs. Optimus had never had to *explain*... He said, “I met someone.”

“Oh! That’s—that’s nice?”

Optimus laughed, awkwardly, and grimaced, wishing not for the first time that he could wear his battlemask with the new helm kibble. “Thank you, and thank you for your concern, Sunstreaker. I appreciate it. I guess I am nervous, but I do want to do this.”

Sunstreaker looked even more confused somehow. “Sir, I don’t mean to pry, but if this isn’t,” he struggled for words for a moment, “a *work* date, then...how did you meet this person? And why all of this?” He gestured at the new paint colors.

“Ah.” Optimus looked down at himself, his open panel and exposed array, and the swathes of bright white plating all over his frame, waiting for new colors. There didn’t seem to be a point to secrecy. “We met in a forum—that is, I read some of his writing, and sent him a message, and then we got to know each other, and now, well.” He found he wasn’t ready to say the words ‘I fell in love with him.’ He hadn’t said as much to Hadron, even. Not yet. “I was using an assumed name, for security reasons...” Optimus trailed off.

Sunstreaker hummed thoughtfully, and Optimus was surprised to see the intensity of his expression. He’d often wondered if the warrior wasn’t more perceptive than he let on.

“You aren’t sure how he’d react, if he knew the truth.”

Sunstreaker was very perceptive, wasn’t he. “He’s a neutral,” Optimus said.

The frontliner only nodded, and picked up the paint again. As he set to work, he asked, “What’s he like?”

“Brilliant.”

And just like that, Optimus was going on about all of Hadron’s wonderful qualities—intense, witty, understanding—and how long they’d known each other, what they talked about, how their first meeting went. Sunstreaker seemed genuinely interested, and he kept asking quiet, simple questions, until the rest of the painting had flown by, even the delicate, careful work on his valve that he had to hold so still for.

As the quick-dry sealant set, Sunstreaker stood back and looked him over. He actually smiled and said, “You look very nice, sir.”

Optimus tried to hide his embarrassed grin, but he still hadn’t got the hang of other people being

able to see his expressions. “Thank you, Sunstreaker.”

The yellow mech started to pack up his gear and supplies and gave him some additional instructions: stay still for about five minutes, then close up, don’t touch the sealant. Then, just when he had started to leave, Sunstreaker hesitated a moment and turned back. Frowning again, he said slowly, “Sir, I wanted—I wanted to thank you. For what you did for me and Sides. He’s been so happy since the anti-targeting topcoat got approved, and everyone’s been treating us—anyway. Thanks for giving us the chance.”

Optimus didn’t try to hide his soft smile this time. “I’m very proud of you both.”

That seemed to be enough emotion to fluster Sunstreaker, so he politely said goodbye and left Optimus to dry. Jazz would be along soon enough to accompany him on the shuttle. Optimus leaned back in his chair and smiled to himself. He’d have to tell Hadron how useful his advice had been for helping the twins.

The *Nemesis* was holding steady on the outer edges of Axis 4’s system when Soundwave brought him the news about Flead. A world on the outer rim, Flead had long been an Autobot outpost, but they’d been making steady headway against their control in an orbital siege campaign over the past six months.

Soundwave reported that the Autobots had just pushed them back *past* the asteroid belts of Flead’s system in mere *days* by using some kind of colorful paint that disrupted the Decepticons’ missile guidance systems. Not even a thoughtful message from Convoy could disperse the resulting anger.

Optimus Prime *should* have been focused on negotiations with Axis 4, especially with all Megatron was doing to get in the way of his efforts, *not* casually debuting some extraordinarily valuable tech from Autobot R&D. A *paint* that disrupted missile guidance! Even for the extremely sensitive systems used by seekers! A paint that worked *in space* on *ships* as well as on mechs—it even interfered with targeting from *orbit*. Energy weapons weren’t affected in the same way, so that was something, at least.

Megatron growled, uselessly.

In a deep, forbidding snarl, Megatron ordered, “Soundwave, tell Starscream and Shockwave to drop *everything* to focus on this problem. I want a solution. Then, assemble a team. While I am otherwise occupied, I want you to make a large purchase of warheads that use analog targeting. Or anything that might reasonably be expected to *hit* an Autobot wearing that paint.”

The Decepticon targeting systems all relied on the same technology. The seekers’ systems were even more finely tuned—drawing on their processing power to construct complex models. Anything else readily available in their region of the galaxy wasn’t as fast, wasn’t as accurate, didn’t mesh well with Cybertronian technology—but that didn’t *matter* as long as it *worked*.

He sighed. “See if any of the scientists want something specific for reverse engineering. Meanwhile, we need *something* to work with.”

This was just what he needed before he left Starscream in command for an evening.

“Soundwave: suggests Megatron cancel social engagement.”

Drawing himself up, Megatron glared, menacingly. “And why would I do that?”

Soundwave stared back at him, impassive. “Convoy: not a wise emotional investment.”

Megatron was surprised enough that he stopped glaring. He’d expected something about not leaving in a moment of crisis—not that he couldn’t rebuff that easily enough—but *this*?

“What?”

Soundwave tilted his helm. “Relationship: becoming intimate. Convoy: neutral. Convoy: will end involvement if true identity revealed. Relationship: has no future.”

The glare was back. Megatron bristled, drawing himself up to his full height, and produced an extremely cogent rebuttal. “You didn’t object before! And how in the Pit would you know what he’ll want?”

Soundwave tilted his helm to the other side. “Before: Convoy was, at worst, distraction; at best, friend, support. Now, Convoy: a vulnerability. Now, Megatron: thinks of love.”

Megatron’s growling engine went ignored as Soundwave continued, “Convoy: will not desire involvement with the Decepticon leader. Megatron: intends to maintain ruse forever?”

“Of course not!”

His second-in-command hummed meaningfully. “Megatron: trusts Convoy? Megatron: intends to tell the truth?”

It was rare that Soundwave, of all mechs, could make him this angry, and even rarer for Soundwave to try to give him emotional advice. Soundwave hadn’t dared interfere with him in such a way—not since they were young and the revolution had been in its earliest stages. Not that there’d even been an occasion for it...not since early on in the war. Personal relationships hadn’t been important. Megatron studiously ignored how the last time Soundwave had given him similar advice, his third-in-command had been unequivocally *right*.

But Convoy was *different*. He *was*.

“Of course I trust him, he’s—he’s—and you don’t know that, maybe he’ll *want* to be my—my—the consort of the leader of the Decepticons!” Megatron clenched his fists. “I’m not cancelling and that’s final!”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“What’s your verdict?” Megatron asked again, with a sly, joyful smile pulling at one side of his mouth. Full of his own breathless anticipation, he whispered, “Do you love it?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

[AGS 22.679.03.13 14:47]

C: I realized I forgot to ask—do you want to meet at the bar again?

H: I have a room at the Hotel Sway. Why don’t you meet me in the lobby and we can see where the night takes us?

C: Perfect. I can’t wait to see you.

Optimus remembered to activate his voice modulator just as he was walking into the Hotel Sway. Light and sound burst over him as the large door of the establishment folded back.

Many different species of mechanicals and organics roamed the lobby, chattering in different languages to each other. He thought back to the various accommodations of the Naughty Tornado Lounge, and saw many of them repeated here. Daydream Station was a trading center—not a very prestigious or influential one, but respectable. Keeping interplanetary businessmen comfortable was apparently a big job, and the hospitality industry, at least in this city, was centered on it. He even caught sight of a few Ongredix talking near a refreshment area.

He’d never stayed in a place like this before. On Cybertron, he’d never even considered traveling offworld, and as Prime, diplomatic stays on other planets usually didn’t involve a commercial establishment. Not that he would necessarily be staying here tonight.

We can see where the night takes us had sounded...provocative, but it was vague. Optimus couldn’t assume that Hadron would invite him to—well, to do anything. Jazz was on standby to pick him up unless he heard otherwise.

He scanned the room, seeing several other mechanicals but no Cybertronians, before turning around and catching sight of Hadron at a small seating area close to the door. He was deep in thought, reviewing a datapad, and he looked to Optimus, somehow, like the most important being in the room.

He startled when Optimus came closer and said his name, but his visor brightened when he looked up. “Hello,” Hadron said. “Won’t you have a seat?”

As Hadron put his datapad into subspace and Optimus sat down across from him, he realized that Hadron must have chosen this spot to accommodate *him*. The chairs were a bit larger than was ideal for Hadron's smaller size, but they were very comfortable to Optimus.

"What has you smiling so much?" Hadron asked.

Optimus stammered, feeling strangely off balance, "I hardly know. I'm just so pleased to see you."

Hadron laughed, "We've only been apart a few weeks."

Optimus smiled back and said, "Much too long." But it came out more serious than he'd planned, and he pursed his lips and looked over Hadron's shoulder at the wall. He wished he could wear his own face mask like Hadron was.

"We're together now," was Hadron's confident, comforting response, and Optimus relaxed a little and looked at his face again.

When Optimus had imagined this moment, he'd had the vague idea that they might rush into each other's arms...but with all these other beings in the room? And he didn't actually lack self-control. It had been...a very long time since he'd last tried initiating any kind of encounter with someone who wasn't already a close friend.

And then, shifting the conversation away from their emotions, much to Optimus's mingled relief and disappointment, Hadron said offhand, "It's nice, don't you think? I haven't seen any Decepticons since I've been on this planet. Always the problem with these open invitation worlds."

Optimus frowned. He said, "I suppose? I hadn't really thought of it. I haven't seen anyone with either faction emblem..."

Hadron quirked his helm thoughtfully. "True. And one is as bad as the other, don't you think?"

Optimus supposed this was just the sort of thing two neutrals might talk about, so he said, "Yes." He didn't—he didn't *believe* that the Autobots were just as bad as the Decepticons, he knew they *weren't*, but as he said it, he thought suddenly of all the things that he himself had done... All the things that might have made a reasonable neutral mech recoil in horror. "Oh yes," he said again.

But he didn't want to turn maudlin so early in the evening, so he asked, "Have you been well since I last saw you?"

"Oh yes, very," Hadron said. "Actually, I took that advice you gave me—about my, uh, business problem. Haven't seen it through all the way yet, but it's very promising."

Optimus smiled, but he was hardly listening. He was thinking about Hadron's hands, and how he might just reach out, and maybe Hadron would reach back—but it was so public, here, and he hesitated.

"So, credit where credit is due. Thank you for the advice. And you, Convoy, have you been well?"

He was opening his mouth to answer—probably with something inane, he hadn't even been this nervous the first time—when a large group of Lilili—whose true species name was considered as unpronounceable to outsiders as the rest of their harmonic language—poured into the lobby all at once, their lilting, chime-like voices quite loud in the space. Since encountering them in the Naughty Tornado Lounge, Optimus had learned that they were the primary residents of this planet.

Optimus laughed to himself, and raised his voice a bit to be heard. "It's kind of loud down here, is

there somewhere quiet we could talk?” He tried to think of a more concrete suggestion, but even the bar they’d been in before hadn’t been quiet, so he said, “We could go upstairs?”

Hadron’s visor seemed to blink.

After a moment, he replied, voice a bit rougher, “Yes, I would like that.”

And then Hadron led the way across the lobby.

Soon they were on the grav-lift, and Hadron had selected the correct floor. Somehow Optimus hadn’t noticed before, but standing next to each other on the lift, he realized that Hadron was more or less level optic-level with his modesty panel. He felt keenly aware of the new, finely-painted accents in his paint job and the new design of his array—curious what Hadron would think of it, if they even got that far—and it was then that he registered that he—he, Optimus—had suggested that they go *straight upstairs* to a *hotel room*.

Wonderful. Just, wonderful. What an impression he must be making.

“Is that new paint?” Hadron asked. When Optimus looked down he saw Hadron looking closely at his legs, then tracking his gaze slowly up—all the way up—to Optimus’s face.

For a terrifying instant, he wondered if somehow his cover had been blown, but then Hadron drawled, “It looks very nice. I’m flattered you went to all this trouble for our...meeting.”

And he looked down Optimus’s torso again, intent.

His vocalizer clicked when he tried to speak, but Optimus managed to croak, “Thank you, I—yes.”

There was something so appealing about Convoy’s nervous eagerness. Megatron had fully expected to spend several hours in increasingly flirtatious conversation—over a shared meal, or sitting together somewhere public—before anything else developed. But instead... Well, his neutral had been delightfully forward.

And all that honest happiness... Convoy just came out and told him how pleased he was, how he’d missed him. No dissembling, no games, nothing subtly implied behind vague statements—just bold honesty.

And even better, Megatron was more and more confident that Convoy wasn’t an Autobot sympathiser. He’d asked some subtle leading questions—of course, Megatron would need to take it slowly, but he was confident. Some gentle persuasion, a few carefully crafted suggestions, and maybe, one day, Convoy would be delighted to find out who ‘Hadron’ really was.

He could have this. He *could*.

And he could have *that* too, Megatron thought, looking to the side again at the panelling between Convoy’s legs. Not that it wasn’t slightly ridiculous that he was at this particularly awkward height.

As they stepped off the lift, Megatron led Convoy down the correct corridor with a light, guiding touch to the inside of his wrist.

“I’ve never done this before,” Convoy said, after he’d been shown into the suite. He looked around, seeming unsure where to put himself, and stood in front of the small couch.

“What? Had an illicit assignation in a hotel?”

That startled a laugh out of the bigger mech, who smiled down at the floor and said, “That too. But I meant, I haven’t...felt this way, so fast, before.”

“Hm,” Megatron said, “I agree. I find you inspiring on so many levels.”

Convoy, clearly without thinking, said, “Two minds meeting?” and then he blushed. “I mean, philosophically. Obviously hardlining isn’t—no one does that anymore, and I hope you—”

“Of course,” Megatron purred.

There was something absolutely mesmerizing in Convoy’s face as he spoke. Shy and delighted at the same time. And then the turn of his mouth went a bit serious as Megatron watched, and he said, “I don’t want you to think I have any expectations—I know what we talked about, but I would be so happy just to spend the evening talking to you—”

How strange to have someone else try to avoid intimidating *him*.

Megatron interrupted the adorable little speech. “Remind me,” he said, taking a few steps forward into Convoy’s space. “What was it we talked about?”

He sent the still-unfamiliar command to retract his facemask and smirked up at Convoy. There was the distinctive whir of vents turning on, but Convoy didn’t flinch or turn away. He looked down at Megatron’s face, gaze intent, and said quietly, “We talked about a kiss.”

How sweet, that he had made such an impression.

Megatron took another step forward. “And what did you have to say about that?”

There was something fierce and hot stirring in his spark as he watched Convoy’s face.

He took another step, until he had to tilt his helm back to see his face, and pushed with both hands on Convoy’s pelvic span. Convoy folded easily—even gracefully—and sank onto the couch, visor bright and focused on Megatron. “Well?” Megatron asked. “What did you say, when we talked about kisses?”

He heard Convoy’s vocalizer reset, and then, his mouth moving softly, Convoy murmured, “I said I would love it if you kissed me.”

Megatron smiled again, wider. “I remember.”

They were of a height now, with Convoy seated on the low couch. The larger mech’s strong, gentle hands gripped the edge of it tightly. So careful, so controlled. It was a marvel, really. This mech had so much deference, so much adoring respect for Megatron, and it didn’t have anything to do with his reputation.

Without preamble, Megatron climbed into Convoy’s lap, kneeling and straddling his legs.

He leaned close and whispered, “Shall we find out if you were right about that?”

Convoy tilted his face up, lips slightly parted, reaching, and Megatron turned his head and their noses brushed and then, oh, Convoy’s mouth was just as soft as he’d imagined, opening and

yielding to him.

The slow press of lips against lips was almost too sweet, too good—so good it was almost unerotic, a glittering sensation that ignored his array entirely and wrapped around his spark instead. Megatron lifted his hands to cradle Convoy's jaw, holding him still, until the contact was agonizingly slow, just the slide of their mouths together, and when finally Megatron pressed deeper and sucked lightly on his bottom lip with an obscene noise, Convoy whimpered piteously.

Megatron pulled back just enough to see the way Convoy was trembling and breathed out, "Oh, yes."

Still holding him with a directing grip on his face, Megatron pressed forward again for a series of light, barely there, tempting kisses. He could feel the way Convoy twitched after each one, trying to chase after Megatron's touch. And he could have pushed, if he'd wanted. This big mech could have broken his hold and plundered his mouth so easily—Megatron wouldn't even have protested—but he didn't.

Megatron tugged gently with his teeth on Convoy's lip, before pulling back once more. He asked, "Well?"

Convoy made an incoherent, staticky noise.

"What's your verdict?" Megatron asked again, with a sly, joyful smile pulling at one side of his mouth. Full of his own breathless anticipation, he whispered, "Do you love it?"

"Yes," Convoy almost choked on the word, visor flickering, switching focus between Megatron's visor and his mouth. He waited just a moment longer, letting the tension build, and then Convoy's whole face softened and he whispered, sweetly, honestly, "I love it."

Something—*something*—about hearing that made Megatron shudder in Convoy's lap, and suddenly his array was insistently taking up all the free space in his processor. He dove back in, deep, and stroked his tongue into Convoy's mouth to taste him.

Convoy rewarded him with a rumbling rev of that big engine. His great big hands rose and gripped Megatron's waist, and then stroked up his back and down again, like he couldn't wait to explore Megatron's frame.

Megatron grinned against his mouth, and surprised himself by laughing. When he pulled back, Convoy was smiling too, looking even more drunk on delight than he'd been on engex that first night they'd spent together.

"Touch me," Megatron said, still smiling. Immediately, those big hands clutched at him, lifting him to pull him close and stroke at seams. And Megatron had *known*, of course, it was obvious, but to actually *experience* how easily Convoy was able to move him was startling.

For a long time, they traded kisses and smiles and lingering touches. Each of them discovered places that would make the other gasp: Convoy's dorsal seams were terribly responsive, but not his helm fins, as Megatron would have expected, and he tilted his head back and gasped appealingly whenever Megatron tugged on his neck cables with his teeth. Megatron was surprised to remember that his own hot spots were different, with all the temporary kibble—his waist was covered, and so were the sensitive attachment points for his cannon.

He found a lovely place at the junction of Convoy's hips that made him jump when Megatron stroked over it. "Hadron, if you keep doing that I won't be able to keep my panel closed."

Megatron sat back on his heels, putting more space between their pelvic spans. He pressed his palm right over the top of Convoy's panel. "It's a good thing I don't want you to keep your panel closed." He stroked over it with a thumb, looking into his visor. "Show me?"

Convoy vented, hard, and Megatron felt the panel transform under his hand. "That's it..."

He felt something bump against his palm and looked down to watch Convoy's spike pressurize.

It was...big.

Megatron felt a tight want stirring deep inside him.

And this paint job had to be new, too—or at least, meticulously maintained. The shaft of the spike was the same purple as Convoy's plating, but the spike head was a brilliant, glowing silver. Paint didn't interfere with sensation in an array, and Megatron knew that, but the suggestion of bare metal there made his valve ache at the thought of the increased charge. There was a succession of sloping ridges, and the peak of each ridge was silver too, and they were emphasized with a pale blue shadow, like the accents on Convoy's plating. Then, a thin straight line of bright white came up lewdly from the base right to the little opening at the tip—Megatron reached out a hand and tilted the spike to see if the line went down the other side...it did. He pumped the spike once, hand struggling to close around it all the way.

Immediately, Megatron wanted to see if that line continued to his valve or not.

"Want to move to the berth?" Convoy asked, voice shaky.

When he nodded assent, his lover lurched into motion, standing right up from the couch, Megatron's hips supported by his hands. Megatron yelped, and instinctively wrapped his legs around Convoy's waist.

Convoy's spike was rubbing against his abdomen now, where they were pressed together, and Megatron was looking down at him, mesmerized.

Megatron wasn't sure anyone had ever carried him in root mode, ever—never mind during interfacing.

"Is this okay?" Convoy looked concerned.

Megatron gave him a light slap on his chest before going back to holding on to his shoulders. "Yes, yes. Come on, take me to berth," he demanded.

And Convoy just—walked. Still holding Megatron tight in his arms, like it was easy.

He was rushing a little bit, so Megatron felt it when he paused on the way through the arch that led to the other part of the suite. He turned to look behind him, but there was just the berth.

"Convoy?"

The taller mech bit his lip on a smile, "You know, that berth is much too big for just you."

Megatron lifted his optic ridge with grudging amusement, "Hm. So it is." Holding back a grin, he reached between them and squeezed the head of Convoy's spike lightly. "I must have made a mistake when I booked the room."

Convoy grunted a laugh and his hips rocked into it. But the touch worked to spur him on, and he

carried Megatron into the room. Ever so gently, he laid him down in the middle of the berth. Megatron felt this great, swooping feeling in his chest, even after he was out of Convoy's hands, as his spark stretched bigger in his core. He wouldn't have thought he'd enjoy that sort of thing...but everything about Convoy was different from every other partner he'd ever had.

The heavy mech crawled on the berth after him, holding himself above Megatron on his elbows, his spike swinging between his legs. It looked even larger from this angle.

He pulled him down for a kiss, but Convoy broke it quickly. Nuzzling against the side of Megatron's face, he said, "Please, can I see you?"

He was Megatron, and he feared nothing, not even being much smaller than his partner for the first time in his functioning, so he opened without hesitation.

He'd refrained from painting his array to match the new paint job, since he would have needed Soundwave's help to do it well, and there were things he wouldn't ask of his loyal second unnecessarily. So there was no navy on his array, but his biolights were all a conservative white, and the rest a combination of silver and black that looked intentional paired with his new paint.

He didn't have ridges like Convoy, but his spike was curved and thick. Or, he was thick relative to his current size, anyway. In an extravagant moment in his youth, he'd gotten a mod to add texturing to the upper surface and a row of raised, flickering nodes down the sides.

Convoy was looking down between their bodies while Megatron's spike peeked out of its housing and then extended fully, looking somewhat dwarfed by his lover's equipment. Convoy's engine revved flatteringly and his vents spun up as he watched.

For a moment, he looked back up at him smiling, breathless. Then he leaned down, bringing their faces close together again and kissed him. One of Convoy's enormous hands slid under the curve of Megatron's lower back and lifted his pelvis up and—oh, yes. Convoy's spike brushed his own with a snap of charge.

Convoy nudged him and said, "I think we may have an issue with compatibility."

"Oh? Because your spike is so massive?"

Convoy broke into a grin and he hid his head against Megatron's shoulder. "Um. Thank you?" he said, laughing.

Megatron chuckled, but it turned into a sigh when Convoy rocked against him again. He was tempted, but he needed to think realistically. Too bad he couldn't just mass-shift himself bigger. "I'm pretty sure I *could* take you...but it would be a lot of work, and, I confess, I'm too impatient for that today."

The way Convoy was smiling at him was practically demanding to be kissed, so Megatron did, tugging his helm down and licking into his mouth. And that was so distracting, as they traded lingering, open-mouthed kisses, that Megatron nearly forgot what he'd been thinking about.

With an effort, he pulled away, and almost lost his train of thought again when Convoy bent to suckle at the soft, flexible places on his neck. With a moan, he said, "I have an idea. Come, roll over."

Convoy grumbled when he had to give up nibbling on Megatron's neck, but he went obediently and lay on his back on the berth.

Megatron climbed over and straddled Convoy's waist. It took some wriggling—his torso was so very thick—but fortunately wasn't impossible. He leaned back on one arm and tilted his pelvis forward, palming his spike as he did, and let his valve panel transform away. The choked sound Convoy made was delicious.

Staring fixedly at the wet valve, Convoy said through a haze of static, "I am *not* going to be able to fit, but I would love to give you my fingers—"

"No, no," Megatron said, stroking one of the affectionate hands clutching at his hips, "Or, not yet. I know what I want."

He lifted himself up on his knees and arranged himself over Convoy's spike. Then, very slowly, and watching his lover's reaction, he sank down, his valve rubbing against the thick shaft until the spike was pressed tight against Convoy's abdomen. Experimentally, Megatron rocked his hips.

"Oh," Convoy breathed, grabbing convulsively at his waist.

Megatron grinned at the reaction, and adjusted himself, wiggling his hips so that the thick shaft was spreading his valve lips and—oh, there—rubbing over his anterior node.

He rocked again, more determined this time, and felt his own slick easing the way, letting him glide luxuriously over the shaft. He tilted his hips back, letting his node catch on lightly on one of those *lovely* ridges on Convoy's spike, and moaned.

Convoy was looking up at him with this stunned, bright-opticked expression, his mouth gone slack.

Megatron rocked again, and ground down, circling his hips, seeking his own pleasure. When he looked down, past his own spike, he could see the magnificent silver head of Convoy's spike pushing out between the junction of his thighs. He lifted up and shifted forward some, and as he sank down, rocking back again, he felt the blunt head of it nudging over his node. Convoy was panting now, but he didn't try to take control, he only flexed his hands over Megatron's hips and thighs. As he dragged himself back, he felt the sensors just at the rim of his valve receiving bright, teasing, delicious bursts of charge as they passed over the nodes on the spike.

But there was something about the way Convoy was looking at him...it made Megatron feel hot and greedy and transcendent.

He really was incredible, Megatron thought. This great mech, so big and strong, so thoughtful and precious and smart, laid out below him like a feast.

He was trying to come up with something to say, but each inevitable rock of his hips jolted him with pleasure again. And anyway, he didn't need to say anything, since Convoy was looking up at him like he'd put the stars themselves in the sky regardless.

He sped up the movements of his hips, driving little chokes and moans and writhes out of Convoy as each pass stroked over his spike.

"Hadron—" he gasped. His hips bucked up beneath Megatron, jostling him. Megatron didn't slow down his rocking and grinding, but he put a hand on top of Convoy's on his hip and squeezed in comfort. "Primus, Hadron, I can't—"

"Hm?" Megatron hummed.

"Please, I can't last—you look so—ah!"

Megatron smiled down at him, triumphant and proud, and pressed his wet and swollen valve against Convoy's throbbing length. His spark felt so full, and suddenly he couldn't think of anything he'd like better than seeing this mech overcome by bliss. He twisted his hips and said, "Go on. I want to watch you."

With a soft cry, Convoy arched, pulling Megatron's hips down harder against him, and overloaded. He was magnificent.

Megatron rocked a few more times, and once Convoy got his senses back the big mech reached out, bringing him in close and kissing him sweetly.

"Thank you," Convoy whispered, smiling. Then, pulling back, and looking down at the mess he'd made between them, he said, "How can I please you?"

"Touch me."

Convoy kissed him again and playfully wrapped his hand around Megatron's spike. "Here?" he asked. Then his hand let go and drifted lower, drawing a pattern in the transfluid that had gotten smeared over Megatron's plump little valve. "Or here?"

Two large digits flirted with the entrance to his valve, and Megatron twitched into the press of them. "I want your fingers in me," Megatron said, and he surprised himself with how his voice sounded. Rougher, weaker than he'd expected. And it wasn't even *his* voice, just the voice he was using. It hadn't really bothered him, until that moment, that his voice wasn't right. That the voice, the sounds, the pleased moans, he was letting Convoy hear weren't even his.

And so much about his frame wasn't his right now...

Convoy sat up, easily moving them both back so he could lean against the wall. He encouraged Megatron to get closer, still on his knees straddling the mech's waist, and rubbed gently against the soft folds of his needy valve. Arm around Megatron's body to support him, Convoy tugged one of his puffy valve lips aside, and dipped one finger in cautiously. Megatron could feel him exploring, stroking at his inner walls with that fingertip, finding sweet nodes to tease and rub.

"More," Megatron said, feeling eloquence leave him.

Convoy was looking intently at him, mouth slightly parted, visor bright and focused. He pressed a second finger inside and gave an experimental thrust.

Megatron groaned, and started to ride Convoy's hand. He heard his lover murmur, "Incredible..."

"Harder," he demanded. He knew he could overload like this, easily. He was so small, and all the sensations were so concentrated, and Convoy's two fingers were more than big enough, but he needed—he needed *something*. He wanted to take that look Convoy was giving him and bottle it up for a rainy day. He wanted to be as close as he could possibly get to him, wanted to drink in that sweet smile as Convoy watched his pleasure.

Soundwave was wrong. Convoy was—Convoy was different, Convoy was *real*. Convoy was sweet, and trusting, and one day he would know Megatron's true name, and it wouldn't make a difference to him. It *wouldn't*. Because Convoy already knew who he was—who he *truly* was, deep inside, apart from the myth, the legend, the leader, the unstoppable force, Convoy knew *him*.

Megatron wanted—he *wanted*—

His frame shook, as he tried to thrust his body down onto those beautifully thick fingers, and his

spark was aching, this strange, glorious feeling rising up in him—and when would they get to see each other again? And he wanted... He wanted...

Megatron shuddered and fearlessly let his chestplates transform to the side.

Sparklight, sudden and fiercely bright, shone between them.

He knew it was crazy. He knew it was impulsive. But...he'd never been able to trust anyone for this before. He'd had trustworthy partners before, but not...not like this. Convoy was caring and vulnerable and *happy* and it was pathetically intoxicating. He wanted as much of that feeling as he could get. Anyway, it wasn't really a security risk—or so he told himself—you couldn't get information this way like you could with hardlining.

He had stilled, not bouncing so much as rocking on Convoy's fingers now. He refocused his optics and looked into Convoy's stunned face. The big mech was looking down between them into Megatron's exposed soul, still supporting him by the waist.

"Oh," Convoy whispered, "You're so beautiful."

When Convoy looked back up to his face, the awe in his expression was unmistakable. Megatron's mouth quirked with new pride. Optics half dim with anticipation, he reached out a hand and placed it gently in the center of Convoy's smooth chest.

Convoy was venting hard now, and his face changed strangely.

And then...nothing happened.

Convoy just kept looking at him. Megatron felt his face falling too, and a sick dread he didn't want to acknowledge welled up in him. His spark gave a pathetic throb, all aching and longing, and it's light flickered over Convoy's face. There was no way Convoy could have missed *that* humiliating display, no way he could have missed seeing how pained Megatron was all the way down to his spark, and Convoy's mouth screwed up and he choked out, almost sobbing, "Hadron, I—I'm sorry, I can't—"

No.

Megatron was stunned into stillness for half an instant, and then his spark contracted, tight, and he was in motion, jerking backwards and getting his vulnerable core protected again as quickly as he could.

Darkness spread out between them as the light retreated.

Optimus wanted to sob.

The Matrix was—the Matrix was *in the way*. He couldn't—he *couldn't*, he couldn't give him this—how could Hadron fail to notice the famous heart of their civilization tucked next to his spark chamber? But he *wanted*, oh, Primus, please, he longed—

But there wasn't time to hurt for himself, Hadron was pulling back and that was horrible—Hadron's whole frame had gone tense, even his valve around Optimus's fingers—and his face was

“No, no, no, sweet,” Optimus stammered, “I want to, please, I want to—” but Hadron’s face was still fierce, and he had a wild desperate thought that maybe he could have Ratchet take the Matrix *out*—his hand was still pressed on Hadron’s lower back, but he was pushing back against it now, leaning away. And Optimus tried to calm his not-his-own voice and continued softly, “Just not yet. That’s all, not yet—you are beautiful, and I am honored.”

Hadron’s face shifted, just enough, so Optimus held him a little tighter, leaned in a little closer, and slipped his fingers out of his valve. Very slowly, feeling like if he moved too fast he would send Hadron running, he raised his hand and set it gently on top of his lover’s chest. “I can’t give you a merge, not yet, but if you would let me...” He gently stroked the center of Hadron’s much smaller chestplate, just where he’d seen his spark opened up, “It would be my pleasure to touch you here.”

Hadron still looked wary. He bit out sardonically, “Is that really something people do or are you making it up?”

Optimus’s spark was racing. One wrong step and he might drive him away.

Slowly he said, “Yes, it is. I’ve done it before, a long time ago. It feels good.”

Hadron had relaxed fractionally, though the glare was still present.

Optimus stroked his chest seams again and said, very quietly, “Let me worship your spark?”

Hadron glowered. Then he nodded.

Optimus could only sigh in relief. He reached for Hadron’s jaw and pulled him into a soft, coaxing kiss. “You had better lay down, if that’s alright,” Optimus murmured. Hadron grumbled into his mouth, but didn’t protest, so Optimus tightened his grip on his waist and cradled him close as he turned them around.

Still kissing him, he let Hadron lie back and settled himself on one elbow over him. He heard a small whir.

When he pulled back and opened his optics, Hadron’s glorious spark was exposed between them again. It spun and whirled. His lover’s face was turned away, and everything about his frame language told Optimus he was still horribly tense.

He would fix that.

His fingers skirted along the very edges of the open plating, not even close to the chamber and its magnificent light yet. Optimus couldn’t help smiling, looking down at the glimmering orb. “You’re so wonderful,” he whispered.

The bright little spark twitched in response, nestled so securely in its chamber. A wispy tendril of sparklight reached up.

Optimus very carefully brushed one fingertip against the little glowing curl and watched it shift in response. Then, three fingers, dragged very gently over the surface.

He looked at Hadron’s face again and saw him looking down at Optimus’s hand as well. The nervous tension seemed gone after the first tentative touches, replaced by a new, much more gratifying tension. Optimus dipped his fingers against just the surface of the spark, and pulled up, very lightly, as if he were trying to create a current in a tiny pool of water. And again, and again,

and again, until he'd found a rhythm.

"Perfect," Optimus whispered.

Helpfully, he could see Hadron's reactions in the spark itself: a throbbing beat, a spin, expansion, contraction. Optimus's own spark ached in response when the corona reached little wisps of itself up out of the chamber. And then there were the garbled moans Hadron was making—sounding almost confused by the stimulation. Optimus remembered how intense it had been, his first time. Hadron wouldn't have any frame of reference for it if he hadn't ever tried manual spark play before. Optimus couldn't help thinking greedily of how much he wanted to find out what this stunning mech's spark looked like in overload.

Optimus moved his fingers in a slow circle, swirling the corona and playing with the growing energy. Hadron gasped, his body arched up, and Optimus had to draw his hand back to avoid going too deep.

"Convoy!" Hadron half growled, half cried. "More, oh—more!"

"What do you need?" Optimus murmured, still gently caressing the surface of the spark.

"I don't know!"

Thinking, Optimus asked, "Valve?"

A shiver and a moan gave him his answer.

Shifting himself lower, Optimus took his hand away. Hadron whined at the loss, and whined even louder when two fingers slid into his valve again. Impatient, he wriggled against them even as Optimus started thrusting. "I didn't mean *stop*—" Hadron complained.

"I'm not stopping." Optimus flashed a cheeky grin at him.

Then, he leaned down and pressed his lips to Hadron's crackling spark in a kiss.

One exploratory flick of his tongue, another, and a series of long indulgent licks were enough to have Hadron bucking up in earnest, completely incoherent now. Optimus smiled, his face pressed into the expanding corona of that perfect spark, face tingling from spark energy that both hurt and didn't hurt at all. He pressed lips and tongue just that littlest bit closer, and then all it took was one, two, three hard thrusts of his crooked fingers into Hadron's valve, and his lover was gasping as his frame stiffened in overload.

Optimus didn't actually get to see what it looked like, since the flare of light was blinding from that close. After lightly rubbing the valve some more, and one more gentle kiss to Hadron's pretty spark, Optimus withdrew.

Hadron's helm was lolling to the side, clearly exhausted. Optimus coaxed his chest plates closed with guiding touches. He was considering getting up for some cleaning supplies for their mess, but Hadron grabbed at his hand and pulled. Still panting, and still, apparently, beyond words, his lover dragged Optimus down to the berth again and pressed his face against his arm. Charmed, Optimus gathered him up and held him close.

Megatron came back to full awareness with a tender feeling lingering in his spark. Also, he was very, very hungry.

It wasn't unpleasant—no, not remotely unpleasant. As recent memories resurfaced in his mind, he thought he could feel that first touch of Convoy's fingers again like it was a brand. Three bright spots where his fingertips had landed. Three bright spots where Convoy had so carefully, so delicately, begun to drag pleasure out of his soul.

It had been so strange—confusing at first. He'd experienced the pleasure in his processor, too, but it had been garbled, totally unknown, and tangled up inextricably with the usual emotional pains and joys that he normally felt from his spark. There had been phantom echoes of sensation throughout his frame as his arousal had built and built, but still. A spark didn't have sensors or lines or circuits. How had he *felt* that mysterious, gentle touch without a sensor net? As he became more and more overwhelmed, he had felt disconnected from his frame, even from his processor. Like his whole being was centered in that bright, throbbing space, being slowly, agonizingly pleased by Convoy's mouth.

And then the fresh stimulation to his valve had broken through, and he had catapulted back into awareness of his frame and then right into a mind-blowing overload.

He checked his internal readouts to find he'd been dozing in light recharge for an hour. Immediately, he analyzed his surroundings—there was something heavy on his waist, and just as he was becoming alarmed, he realized that it was only Convoy's arm. He was tucked up against Convoy's side, held there securely. Convoy was laying down on the berth with him too, but he had a datapad held up in front of his face with his other hand.

Megatron relaxed again.

This was more than slightly undignified, but he felt safe.

He hummed, and checked that his voice modulator hadn't reset—just to be sure. Then he asked, "What are you reading?"

Convoy looked over at him and beamed. "Welcome back," he said, and leaned close to steal a kiss.

Megatron grumbled, but allowed it. "Yes, yes, but what are you reading?"

"Alien literature. I like to pick up a few samples of the writing of different species whenever I'm in a new place. The translation software didn't do a great job with this one, I'm afraid." Convoy turned the pad off and set it aside. "So, what's the verdict?"

"What?" Megatron frowned.

Convoy grinned, looking playful, and drawled, "Did you love it?"

Megatron was taken aback for a moment—and then he got the joke. He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling back. His face heated, remembering that big frame leaning over him as he was spread open—vulnerable in a way he'd never been, never allowed—and then Convoy had done that thing with his mouth that Megatron didn't even have words for...

"It was okay," he lied, trying to get the stupid grin off his face.

But Convoy kissed him again, so that was alright.

"I do need energon," Megatron said when they separated. "That was...surprisingly energetic."

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Convoy said, smug. Then, sighing, and looking a bit embarrassed, he said, “You know, you are so very beautiful in pleasure.”

Megatron coughed and tried to feel less like a starry-opticked newbuild.

They ordered energon delivered to the room after that, and shared it still laying in berth together. Convoy read choice, badly-translated sentences aloud from that book for them both to laugh at. It was some kind of romantic tragedy about a failed business deal, made more ridiculous by incomprehensible idioms and mangled grammar.

“It’s supposed to be a famous classic,” Convoy complained.

“Plenty of Cybertronian ‘classics’ are awful reading,” Megatron said, tracing absent-minded circles on Convoy’s shoulder plating.

“True enough.”

And then Megatron said, trying for as low and seductive as he could get with his new voice, “Do you know, Convoy, I’ve thought of another way we could entertain ourselves.”

Which was how Megatron ended up with his spike buried in the surprisingly close embrace of Convoy’s hot valve when his mass-shifting malfunctioned.

Before that, spiking Convoy had been going reassuringly well.

Convoy was on his hands and knees, very obligingly presenting that pretty valve to him. It did have a white stripe down the middle, continued down from the spike as he’d hoped, and a delightfully naughty circle of white and silver delicately painted around the node.

It might have been a trick of his processor, but sensation on his spike even felt more intense at this size.

He didn’t have any experience spiking a much larger partner. It was definitely a challenge. Convoy was on his knees, and Megatron had to half stand, half crouch to get a good angle. He had a new respect for every smaller partner he’d allowed to make an attempt on his valve. How to find the right angle? Was there a right angle? How to stay focused when there’s such a lovely expanse of plating right in front of you asking to be grabbed? He was having quite a bit of success, if Convoy’s moans and pleas were anything to go by.

Megatron hadn’t expected that a larger valve would feel quite this good. He was driving his spike into something soft and forgiving, instead of something tight and throbbing. One didn’t feel better than the other—just different. Novelty had an appeal all its own.

Megatron was leaning over his lover’s aft as much as he could—trying to drive down into a particular spot Convoy seemed to like—when it happened.

He’d hardly known what the feeling was until it was already too late to try to get ahead of it.

It had started in his spike—or maybe he’d just felt it there first. He’d thought Convoy was squeezing down on him, since he’d been crying out in ecstasy at that moment.

The second thing he'd noticed was his hands. He'd had to adjust his grip on Convoy's hips, because his hands got too big for the little handholds he'd been using. And then, half-standing half-leaning over his lover, as his legs got bigger he almost overbalanced and had to kneel to remain inside. By then he knew exactly what was happening—not that he could stop it.

Convoy's valve was getting tighter and tighter around his growing spike, and the big mech was moaning louder and louder.

With a crack, Megatron's false helm covering split and fell off him in pieces. With one hand, he narrowly kept the remnants from falling onto Convoy. Megatron had stilled by then, trying desperately to figure out what he should do. As soon as Convoy thought to turn around and look, well. His cover would be blown. All his extra kibble, the visor, broke entirely as his size ratcheted up. Even the paint—applied when he was small—cracked and shrank relative to his frame.

Then, with the last little increase in size, Convoy yelped, and his valve clenched, and before he knew what he was doing, Megatron was thrusting his spike into that tight grip, chasing greedily after sensation, and Convoy shuddered all over and overloaded. His voice rose in a desperate warble that ended in the fizzling pop sound of a shorted vocalizer, and he slumped limply against the berth, his hips supported by Megatron's hands.

The ripple of his overloading valve drew a moan out of Megatron, who was still trying to decide *what to do now*.

At least he didn't see any energon at the now-very-stretched valve rim. He was suddenly very grateful Convoy had turned out to be such a large mech.

Before he could even begin to process this disaster, Megatron instinctively thrust forward into the now tight, tight squeeze of the wet valve he was in. Convoy gasped and moaned, a low, deep sound. Oh, this was going to be very difficult to explain—and he wasn't *ready*. But—Convoy would understand. He would. Dear, sweet Convoy.

Megatron rocked into Convoy again—he just couldn't help it, all that tight, wet heat, and he'd been climbing steadily to overload before this. Convoy moaned deeply again, and then he said, panting, slightly incoherent, “Hadron, what—not that I'm complaining, but—what?”

That was *not* Convoy's voice.

Megatron *knew* whose voice that was.

Megatron did *not* panic.

His partner started to push himself back up on his hands and, no, he couldn't allow that. Before ‘Convoy’ could turn around and look, Megatron loomed over him, spike still nestled inside his valve, and pressed Optimus Prime's face gently into the berth.

The mech went obediently, murmuring something, his shoulders collapsing weakly again. He tilted his hips back and tried to spread his legs just a bit more and Megatron was absolutely mesmerized

Optimus Prime.

Right. Damage control. Buying time.

Trying not to sound like he was seriously considering pulling a gun out of his subspace, Megatron replied, “I have...a mod, it malfunctioned.”

Could he be wrong? Could he be imagining that voice he knew so well?

Unable to resist, Megatron rocked his hips inside the slick valve once more, and there was that voice again, moaning something that might have been ‘Hadron.’

He wasn’t imagining it. That was the voice. And Convoy was the right size—exactly the right size. How had he not *seen* this? Obviously there was a disguise like Megatron’s—the new paint, the fake plating—but the shape was the same.

Megatron’s optics caught on those big, talented hands and, now he knew to look, it was obvious. He knew those hands. Optimus Prime had punched him in the face with those hands—

Wonderful. Just, absolutely wonderful. He just hadn’t noticed. Perfect. Soundwave wasn’t even going to have to say anything, he would just look at him, accusing, and Megatron would deserve it too.

He wasn’t ready for this night to end—no. He wasn’t ready for this night with *Convoy* to end. He wasn’t ready for this night with *his lover* to end. But it had already ended.

Convoy was Optimus Prime.

Optimus Prime was Convoy.

Convoy didn’t exist—no. No, he wasn’t ready for that, either.

Optimus Prime grumbled a little, apparently at the pause in the proceedings, and wiggled his hips in an extraordinarily distracting way. Inexorably, Megatron thrust hard into that sweet, traitorous valve again.

Optimus Prime whimpered.

He thought to himself, hysterically, *This is Optimus Prime. Optimus Prime has his aft in the air and we are interfacing.*

Well, he wasn’t going to run from a fight.

Megatron took up a proper rhythm, each thrust knocking another pleased cry out of Optimus Prime—whose whole frame was shivering with pleasure again—because what else was he supposed to do but keep going, when his spike was buried to the hilt in a needy, pulsing valve?

He wanted to overload. Actually, he wanted to overload inside Optimus Prime. He wanted to overload inside Optimus Prime’s well-fragged valve and watch his transfluid spill out of it after. He wanted Optimus Prime to *scream* as he pounded him into the berth—

And Megatron *was* pounding him now, fiercely, and Optimus was shaking, whining, moaning *Hadron’s name*—

He dragged those generous hips back into each strong thrust and growled his frustration. He wanted *Convoy*. The real Convoy, except there was no *real Convoy*, there was only Optimus Pitspawn Prime, who had been his treasured lover all along—if not through every conversation then at least through this whole night—could it have been a plot? The Prime’s valve was clenching around him now, deliciously.

But no, it couldn’t have. Optimus couldn’t have known who Hadron really was, or he would never have—he would never have—

The vivid echo of Convoy's gentle fingers caressing his spark burned through Megatron in a rush of memory. Then, rhythm stuttering, his spike grinding into tight wetness, he stumbled into overload.

Optimus didn't really know what was going on.

But he also didn't really *care* what was going on.

Hadron had some kind of mod? Optimus wasn't sure exactly what it did besides feel incredible. That had been one truly stunning overload. He was still reeling from it, and the magnificently aggressive way Hadron was spiking him now wasn't helping him regain coherence.

He was being pressed into the berth, valve plundered by Hadron's modded spike, and it was bliss.

As the snap of charge and the warm wash of transfluid signalled his partner's overload, Optimus wondered for the first time *how* his extremely small lover was holding him down. Nevermind the force required—Hadron shouldn't have been able to reach even just to touch his helm...

Optimus still wasn't worried. It was hard to be worried when his circuits were still sparking so pleasantly. And this was Hadron. There was probably some perfectly reasonable explanation.

And then he felt a weight press down on his back. A very large arm wrapped around his waist, holding him still. A heavy, warm puff of air brushed over the back of his neck.

"Hadron—" Optimus started to ask.

There was a growl next to his audial. And then—and then—

"Optimus," Megatron drawled in his unmistakable rasping voice.

What. His vents stalled.

"Where—*how*—where is—"

"Don't be stupid, Prime. I am Hadron, obviously. You are—well." Megatron growled under his breath, "It's clearly a practical joke played on us by Unicron."

Optimus tried to push himself up, but he only had control of one arm, and Megatron had him very, very thoroughly pinned, so the attempt went nowhere. Or, it went somewhere, since the wriggling jostled *Megatron's spike*, making his disloyal valve very interested again. He slumped down.

"How did you know I was—"

"Your voice, idiot."

"My—oh." He heard himself now. His voice modulator had shorted out, and he had been so pleasure-drunk he hadn't noticed. His logs suggested it had been during that last overload.

"Did you know the whole time?" Optimus asked quietly.

Megatron pressed his helm even harder into the berth. "Don't. Be. Stupid."

“I wouldn’t put anything past *you*—”

“Do you not remember what we were doing just a few hours ago?” Megatron spat in a vicious whisper.

And—oh.

Oh.

Hadron’s beautiful spark—no, not Hadron’s. Not Hadron’s spark at all.

Every strut, every cable in Optimus’s frame tensed up—including in his valve, which was still stuffed full of spike.

“Primus—stop that, Optimus!”

“Stop what?” he said, despairing.

“Stop *that*,” and Megatron bucked his hips shallowly for emphasis. He grunted, “Unless you want me to take you again.”

Oh. Stop squeezing.

Optimus was shaking a little, from the shock of everything, but he wasn’t actually afraid. Not yet, even though it was Megatron. And this was—he was—he was still aching from that overload, and —

Well. Why not?

He rocked his hips back, experimentally.

“Dammit, Prime, I told you—”

Optimus did it again. Then he rolled his hips in a slow circle.

“Oh,” Megatron said, eloquently.

Would he go for it? Optimus wondered.

Still keeping a secure grip on his helm and torso, Megatron eased back, pulling his spike out, and Optimus clenched his jaw with disappointment—before Megatron plunged right back in again in one unforgiving stroke.

“Nngh,” Optimus whined.

That was very—very something. And Megatron just...did it again. Hard and deep and merciless and perfect.

Optimus let some of his tension go, arching his back, pushing his aft higher as much as he could under Megatron’s controlling grip.

Under the push and pull of that thick spike he could almost forget what was happening. Almost forget all the trouble he would be in when this was over.

There was an insistent growl from behind him.

Megatron, his voice gone dark and deep and greedy, said, "If we're going to do this, I'm not going to let you pretend, Prime."

And then, very suddenly, they were moving.

Megatron pulled back, his spike slipping out for real this time, and lifted off him. Optimus was still too dazed to realize there was an opening to get free if he wanted it before Megatron was on him again, dragging him and flipping him over onto his back and maneuvering his legs open before thrusting that spike right back inside.

And Optimus saw his face for the first time.

It was Hadron's face. Sans visor and writ large, but still the same. He didn't know what he'd expected. That was Hadron's mouth and Hadron's nose, Hadron's cheek. Optimus didn't know whether he wanted to cry or to kiss him.

Megatron grabbed both of Optimus's wrists and held them down on the sides of his helm. He leaned in close until they were nose to nose. "If we're going to do this, then I'm going to know it's *you*, and you're going to know it's *me*."

He wasn't sure, he wasn't sure about any of this, but there was a hot, tight feeling in his spark that was suffusing his whole frame and he *wanted* it.

Megatron snapped, "Yes?"

"Yes," Optimus breathed, and he raised his helm as well as he could and kissed him.

Megatron made a low, delicious, startled sound and broke away with a gasp. Snarling, he said, "All of this, gone."

He let Optimus's wrists go and gestured at Optimus's whole frame. It wasn't hard to get the hint. Under Megatron's intense gaze, the Prime started with his visor, sending the commands to unlock it from his frame and gently tugging it away. Then, the false helm. Megatron helped him with that, pulling his shoulders up so he had room to get it off.

"That certainly explains why your helm crests weren't sensitive..." Optimus overheard Megatron murmur under his breath.

But patience had never been Megatron's strong point, and soon he was tugging at false armor too, dragging the shoulder pauldrons off to reveal gleaming silver smokestacks and throwing the whole false chestplate to the other side of the room. Underneath, Optimus was a whole patchwork of mismatched paint.

When they were done, and Optimus was more or less himself once more, Megatron just sat there looking at him. One of his arms was looped around Optimus's waist again, keeping his pelvic span pressed tight to Megatron's lap. Neither of them seemed to know how to begin now. Just when he was considering how to politely extricate himself without violence, Megatron reached up—almost tentative, or curious, but that couldn't be right—and stroked the length of one of his finials. Optimus couldn't help shivering. Megatron smirked, triumphant, and tweaked the sensitive tip. Optimus twitched, and snapped, "Are we just going to sit here—"

And that erased the smirk, but it seemed enough to spur Megatron into fragging him again.

The leader of the Decepticons set a brisk, almost angry pace. He snarled down at him, "So, do you correspond with a lot of people under an assumed name?"

Optimus scowled, and grabbed at Megatron's hips, trying to get him to move faster. He shot back, "Don't you know it's rude to use mass displacement without asking first?"

"It was obviously an *accident*, you imbecile—"

"Oh, *I'm* the imbecile. Whatever happened to all the sweet nothings, Megatron?"

"You want sweet nothings, do you?" There was a very dangerous gleam in Megatron's eye.

"I—no!"

He hefted one of Optimus's legs into the air and propped it up against his shoulder, leveraging Optimus's whole pelvic span off the berth, and thrust in even deeper. "What shall I call you then? Sweetspark?" Megatron slapped Optimus's aft, hard, and he jolted with a surprised yelp. "Treasure?" Another slap. "Darling? Pet?" Two more stinging slaps that Optimus felt go straight to his valve.

Optimus rumbled his engine and glared, making a great effort to stop moaning so much. Megatron huffed a laugh, and dropped his leg down again, laying on top of him, close. Rocking and grinding steadily, he whispered through a shaky grin, "'Lover?'"

Optimus didn't reply, but his fans spun up even faster. They were face to face now, Megatron resting his forehead against Optimus's helm, neither of them looking away. This close, the thrum of Megatron's spark sent a shiver through him, like the driving beat of a drum pushing his tension higher.

He gently nudged his nose against Megatron's, shifting his face to the side. Then he tilted his jaw up and slotted their mouths together. At first, the kiss was as fierce and overwhelming as the fragging. Megatron bit greedily at his bottom lip and pressed hard against him, but Optimus opened to him, and licked gently at Megatron's lips, sucked at them. And then Megatron was kissing just like Hadron had kissed.

Everything went all slow and sweet. Megatron making long, savoring strokes into him, Optimus writhing, whether because it was all too much or not enough.

Optimus groaned, thoughts coming out barely coherent now, and broke the kiss to say, "My node—I need—"

Uncomplaining, Megatron shifted his weight and eased his hand between their bodies. Each skilled flick and rub of Megatron's fingers made his swollen nub throb and his valve ache.

Optimus grabbed for him blindly, putting his arms around his neck and just holding on. Megatron's frame was shaking now, too, and he was making quiet little moans and sighs, especially when Optimus squeezed down on him, inside.

He knew it was all going to be over much too fast, but he didn't want to slow down. He didn't want to miss a single agonizing moment of the steady climb to overload, didn't want to miss a single one of Megatron's reactions, or a single thing his talented fingers and spike could do. Because this was Hadron, and not Hadron at all, Hadron who he'd—who he'd—

Helpless, Optimus whispered against Megatron's lips, "Lover."

Megatron's optics went wide and he choked, face twisting, and with new determination he was pressing harder with his fingers and driving in deeper with his spike, and he pushed his face close, almost uncomfortably close, and growled back, like it was a challenge, or like he was struggling to

Speak, “Lover.”

And there, that was the watershed, an ache of bright, shining pleasure spreading out from his core all over his frame in overload.

Afterwards, Optimus lay back, panting, and watched as Megatron’s face twisted up even more and he cried out, spilling transfluid deep inside. And that was Hadron’s face, too. That was Hadron’s expression.

With a relieved moan that did strange things to Optimus’s emotional circuitry, Megatron pulled his spike free and sat back on his knees. The intensity of his expression didn’t lessen as Megatron looked down at Optimus’s thoroughly debauched frame.

It was almost over, wasn’t it? This dream. This relationship.

Wordless, Optimus reached for him.

Megatron took his hand and looked down at it. He opened his mouth to speak, and Optimus dreaded whatever he would say to break the spell—but Megatron paused, frowning suddenly. “Did you hear that?” he asked.

“No? What is it?”

Megatron looked toward the door to the antechamber, frowning even more. “I thought I heard—”

Just at that moment, there was a blindingly bright white light, and before either of them could move, they were sinking heavily into unconsciousness. Before shutdown, a distant part of Optimus’s processor registered that Megatron had fallen half on top of him.

There was the murmur of alien voices, and then, nothing.

Chapter End Notes



Coppernickels created this amazing illustration of a scene from this chapter! Go show them some love on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#).

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“Don’t be such a prude, Prime.”

The Axis 4 incident set in motion a series of events that are well-documented, but the kidnapping itself remains cloaked with mystery.

– Inquiens, 22.679: *An Unexpected Year*

When Optimus woke up, he was sitting, and his whole frame felt stiff. Where was he? Where was Hadron—no, Megatron. Where was Megatron?

His legs were stretched out in front of him on a cold floor, but they weren’t right, somehow—his processor was very alarmed about something and he couldn’t quite—he was leaning back against something, but he couldn’t turn his head to look.

He couldn’t turn his head.

He just couldn’t do it. His processor sent the command, and then nothing happened. He tried his legs, and his arms, but that didn’t work either. He looked down at himself by moving his optics and saw shackles around his upper arms, and then there were more thick bonds on his feet as well. But even if there hadn’t been, he would still be paralyzed. He couldn’t even wiggle.

He tried to access his short-range internal comms, but there was some kind of jamming, and he couldn’t ping anything.

Evidently his fuel pump was still operating, since he was awake.

He looked around as much as he could. The room was very bare, and small. There was what looked like an open archway in front of him, but he could see the telltale glimmer or a force shield at the corners of the aperture. He was sitting at an angle, so he could see part way down the right hand corridor, but not the left at all.

He tried to speak, and that worked, thank Primus, though in his disorientation all that came out was a garbled noise.

“Optimus?” a very familiar voice asked, just behind him.

“Megatron? Where are we?” Instinctively, Optimus tried to turn around, and it still didn’t work.

“Somewhere embarrassing...”

How typically helpful. Now that Optimus was more alert, he could feel the quiet pulse of a spark

against his back. He must be leaning against Megatron. “Are we tied together?”

“What, are your optics broken?”

Optimus sighed. “Megatron, I can’t move my head.”

“Whatever. Who knew where you were going tonight?” Megatron growled.

“I—” Optimus thought for a moment. “No one I don’t trust.”

“You are such an Autobot.”

“I don’t know why that comes as a surprise—”

“It’s *not* an attractive quality,” Megatron said. Optimus could practically hear him rolling his optics.

“Oh yes, because you found me very ‘unattractive’ a few hours ago—”

They both went quiet when they were interrupted by the sound of mincing footsteps coming from down the corridor.

“Prime! What’s happening? I can’t see!” Megatron whispered.

Optimus tried to rein in the petty glee he felt over being the only one facing the cell door. Though any humor evaporated when he saw who came into view.

“Angred!” Optimus gasped.

His guide from Axis 4?

Angred was a wide, multi-armed biped, like most of her species. As usual, there was a headdress made of thin slices of granite decorating her neckruff, which Optimus believed denoted her rank and wealth. But for once her garment was simple and functional, without complex color or adornment. She was accompanied by several assistants who were studiously taking notes.

“What?” Megatron said from behind him, “You don’t mean to tell me that those ridiculous Ongredix are responsible for this!”

“Cybertronian Optimus Prime, Cybertronian Megatron, greetings. You are being temporarily imprisoned by myself,” she said in the vowel-heavy drone of Ongredian, and smiled, very politely.

Optimus engaged his reverse translation software so he could reply in their language. “Angred, what is going on?”

“We must offer thanks. It was very convenient, finding both of you at the same time,” Angred said.

For the first time, Optimus wondered when exactly their panels had closed. The last thing he remembered, Megatron had just pulled out of him, and they’d still been covered in a mess of transfluid and lubricant, very much exposed. That sort of thing could be automatic, once a mech fell into recharge if there weren’t any obstructions. And how had they been transported here anyway—

“What do you want with us, organic?” Megatron spat out behind him in their language, since apparently he had the language pack for Ongredix in primary memory.

She smiled again, characteristically serene. “You are being ransomed, of course.”

“Why?”

“During negotiations with your two corporations, we became aware of your importance. I am choosing to make use of that for personal advantage.” Then, she smiled, silver teeth glittering.

“You’ve been negotiating with both of us?”

She looked briefly confused, and then said, “Of course.”

Well, that explained all the bizarre things the Decepticons had been doing, like *not attacking*.

Megatron growled, “I am not some pathetic weakling to be traded around like a commodity—”

Optimus paid him no attention. “What has been done to our frames?”

“Ah yes!” Angred said, looking delighted and waving all six arms expansively through the air—though Optimus was beginning to suspect that his interpretation of Ongredix body language had been very skewed from the beginning. “Another innovation from my genius! I learned of a program which gives no movement, but no harm. So you cannot fight or escape, but you will not be injured. I am a very reputable professional, and I never sell damaged goods.”

Megatron sighed and said to Optimus in Cybertronian, “It’s a kind of malware I recognize. Not very nasty, but very annoying.”

Ah. So it was just his motor functions. And inbuilt weaponry. He knew all his internal processes were still active: like his fuel pump, temperature management, self-repair. He could probably engage minor transformations—though he didn’t feel like trying any in front of Angred. Disengaging his battle mask or opening his more intimate panels weren’t the kind of thing that would help him escape, anyway. Alt-mode transformation was locked down, though, he’d checked. At least he could still make facial expressions.

“But, Angred, I thought you wanted a career in your government—”

“Please don’t sympathize with our captors, Prime, it is beneath even you,” Megatron butted in, unhelpfully, speaking Cybertronian again.

“—won’t going against their wishes keep you from...”

Angred waved him into silence. “Not at all, Cybertronian Optimus Prime. My ingenuity, boldness, and business acumen will be acknowledged throughout the solar system. The glory of this deal will send me straight to the bottom, where I will control the foundations of my world!” Angred struck a dramatic pose, and her assistants clapped appreciatively.

Optimus was too stunned to respond.

Drama finished, Angred spoke again, businesslike, “We will update you when the ransom has been agreed upon. If there are any needs you have, you may yell, and one of the guards will come to receive your bribe. Enjoy your stay.”

Gaping, Optimus watched them leave.

He was beginning to suspect that the translation problems they’d been having with this culture were more severe than he’d thought.

“Have they gone?” Megatron asked.

“Why should I tell you anything?” Optimus snapped. “You got us into this mess!”

Megatron scoffed and said, “Oh, don’t look at me like that.”

“I’m not looking at you at all, Megatron,” Optimus said, glaring at the force field. He was twisting his processor in knots, trying to figure a way out of here that didn’t involve draining the Autobot accounts dry.

“I can *sense* that self-righteous expression you wear so often. Anyway, it’s your own fault, you gave me the advice—”

“My battlemask is back up, if you must know, and—what?”

“Don’t you remember that night in the bar?”

Of course he remembered ‘that night in the bar,’ he was going to remember ‘that night in the bar’ for the rest of his miserable existence—Optimus gasped and said, “You don’t mean that story about—about—how was I supposed to know!”

“You’re the reason I decided to try to buy them off, so,” Megatron mused, “it’s your fault we’re here right now. After all, if I had obliterated their pathetic planet, then they wouldn’t have kidnapped us.”

“That is an awful thing to say.”

“Oh, spare me. And you can’t have been trying very hard in *your* negotiations, you’ve been waffling around in that system for months. Just couldn’t seal the deal, could you?”

Feeling petty, Optimus shot back, “I ‘sealed the deal’ with you, didn’t I?”

He heard Megatron’s sharp, indrawn breath, and, okay, maybe Megatron was right, because Optimus could definitely feel that glare without seeing it.

But then Megatron didn’t say anything, and Optimus shouldn’t have felt bad about that, because this was Megatron, but—he did. And he couldn’t even move, couldn’t even—what? Pull him into his arms and apologize? Like that would fix anything. It’d probably just get him punched in the face.

Optimus took a deep breath and started, “No, I know it wasn’t like that, I’m—”

“Just shut up, Prime.”

Frag. Everything about this situation was upside down and inside out. And Optimus really didn’t think of what happened like—like it was—

He tried again. “What we shared—”

“If you need to talk so desperately,” Megatron said, at an increasingly loud volume, “maybe you could tell me how to thwart that stupid laser guidance glitter paint of yours!”

“The what—oh.” Optimus remembered. “Heh.”

“What do you mean, ‘heh?’”

“Oh, ah. Well,” Optimus began. “Actually, we have you to thank for that.”

He could feel the glare again. “You *what?*” Megatron growled.

“Do you remember when I told you about that prank gone wrong in my office?”

Megatron slowly replied, “Vaguely...”

“And you gave me some advice about channeling that energy into more productive—”

“Stop,” Megatron said, sounding pained. “I remember now. Who was it?”

“The twins.”

Megatron cursed. “I had to learn that lesson the hard way with Starscream and Shockwave. So glad you could make use of it, Prime.” Megatron did not sound glad. Megatron sounded like, if they weren’t both tied up and paralyzed, he’d have both hands wrapped around Optimus’s throat, trying to cut off the energon flow to his processor.

“You’re telling me I took command advice based on how you deal with *Starscream?*”

Megatron rumbled at him, offended. “What, like I haven’t been successfully managing him for millions of years?”

“He keeps trying to kill you!”

“I’m still not dead!”

Optimus sighed. A fair point. “Arguing won’t get us anywhere. Do you have any ideas?”

“Soundwave won’t be expecting me to check in for some time,” Megatron admitted.

“Ah.” Now that Optimus thought about it, Jazz wouldn’t start worrying for a while either. “So they’ll find out when they get the ransom demand.”

“What, you don’t have a keeper to notice you’ve gone missing?” Megatron asked.

Optimus winced. “I, uh, sent a comm while you were asleep...letting Jazz know not to expect to hear from me until tomorrow.”

At the time, Optimus had been thinking that they might recharge together. He’d had a vision of waking up with Hadron wrapped in his arms, watching the beautiful planetary sunrise side-by-side, maybe enjoying some sweet, lazy interfacing before morning fuel—so, just, all the things he was never going to get to have.

Megatron was silent.

It was a bad situation. Not the worst he’d ever found himself in, though. Angred hadn’t threatened to kill them. Though how they were going to negotiate for the monzanite after this debacle was not something he wanted to think about.

Depending on how much they asked for, Prowl might just pay up rather than risk a fire fight. Assuming the Autobots would even be able to find them. Unfortunately, they didn’t have a policy for what to do if the Prime was kidnapped and held for ransom. Unless it was by the Decepticons.

He knew their budget, and there wasn’t room in it for this. The war effort couldn’t afford that kind

of expenditure.

And he still wasn't any closer to figuring out a way to escape.

"Will Starscream even pay to get you out?" Optimus asked suddenly, worried. Could he leave Megatron behind here?

"Ha! Probably not, no. But Soundwave will handle it...whenever he gets back to the *Nemesis*,"

"It sounds like it's in both our best interests to find an alternative way out of here. I don't know of a way to break malware like this, do you?"

Megatron laughed bitterly. "Not by myself. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you. I'd just break these bonds and get out of here."

"Of course, how could I forget." Decepticons.

"However," Megatron said slowly, "I do know how to break it with assistance."

"Well, I don't know if you've noticed, but 'assistance' is in short supply at the moment—"

"Assistance from *you*, idiot."

"I'm just as immobile as you are, 'idiot.'"

Megatron sighed in exasperation. "Where are our wrists right now?"

Clearly Megatron was going somewhere with this, but Optimus didn't have any idea where. "Our wrists are pressed together. So what?"

It didn't have much impact on their situation, apart from vaguely reminding Optimus that he still had some background processes running centered on the concept of 'touching Megatron.'

"Am I really going to have to spell it out for you?"

Optimus rolled his optics. "Spell what out?"

"Our wrist *ports* are aligned, Prime," Megatron growled, like he was spitting the words out through his teeth. "This kind of malware can be removed by a medic 'lining in, but I've done it before and I can do it again."

Optimus was stunned silent, so Megatron just kept talking, like he hadn't gone insane. "I'll send you the program, then we'll both run it on the other at the same time—"

"You cannot be suggesting that we hardline," Optimus said. "You *cannot*."

"Don't be such a prude, Prime."

"I'm—I'm not—" Optimus spluttered. "It's a security issue!"

"I'm sure that will comfort you when the Autobots run out of credits and then out of energon," Megatron said.

"That might not happen!" Optimus was suddenly intensely aware of every port and jack in his body, but especially the ones in his wrists. Ratchet had to plug in for every checkup, and sometimes when he got injured, but he always used one of the Prime's thoracic ports. Optimus hadn't even

opened the cover to his wrist connectors, nevermind used them, in thousands of years.

“Ugh,” Megatron said, sounding bored. “Yes, obviously, we could sit here and wait for a rescue that may or may not be coming, all while worrying that our more loyal subordinates will bankrupt the war effort to get us back. Probably we’ll live through the experience. Or, instead, we could get out of here right now.”

Oh, he hated when Megatron was right. “But we can’t make a reciprocal connection, the alignment’s off—”

Megatron sighed, “So I’ll connect to you on my right side, and you’ll connect to me on my left.”

Grabbing for any excuse he could, Optimus said, “There’s no guarantee that the angle will be right —”

Very slowly, with a facsimile of patience, Megatron said, “Well, we’ll need to *try* to know for sure, won’t we?” Then, in a commanding growl, he said, “Open up, and plug in.”

Megatron matched words to actions and engaged the small transformation to reveal his connectors. Optimus could feel the movement against his plating. He would have jolted, but, well, he couldn’t. Every command, even the subconscious ones, he sent to move his frame was useless. But when he sent the command to initiate the small transformation that would open up his wrist panels, well. That worked just fine. He was starting to have a suspicion about what purpose, exactly, this immobilization malware had been designed for.

But he stopped thinking about that when Megatron, with his usual total lack of hesitation, jacked right in.

Optimus held back an extremely inappropriate moan, and said, “If you try to prompt for secure information—”

“Yes, yes, you’ll throw me out, come *on*, Prime,” Megatron said, sounding gratifyingly unsteady.

Optimus reciprocated the connection.

He hadn’t done this for someone without medic protocols in an age, so it took him a moment to figure out how to bring his main firewalls down. At least those were up to date, and his databanks still well-partitioned. His databanks and archives should be secure, unless he shared something on purpose.

Megatron’s mind opened up for him almost simultaneously, and they poured into each other over the link.

Immediately, Optimus felt out of his depth. It had been so long that he couldn’t quite keep things surface level and he struggled to control what thoughts and emotions he was sharing. It wouldn’t have been a problem if this was an *attack*—he had protocols for that—but he wasn’t being attacked, he was letting someone—*Megatron*—in on purpose and all of *his* emotions were shoving at him in a wave that he couldn’t quite interpret.

“Will you calm down, Prime?” Megatron said aloud.

Which was rude, first of all, but curious, because Optimus could feel Megatron’s processor queuing up the words, and what he felt as he spoke them. Not quite clearly, but he felt the ‘Optimus’ tacked onto ‘Prime,’ and Megatron’s defensiveness, and a deep-seated confusion that was named ‘Convoy’—

And he could feel in the background, hidden, pushed down, Megatron's *intense* discomfort with being immobilized this way. Trapped inside his own frame, helpless, stripped of all—Optimus forcibly stopped dwelling on that so they didn't both get trapped in a loop of panic.

Optimus could feel anger and pain and grief not his own, and small glimpses of something tender, something longing—

"Alright, that's enough," Megatron muttered, and—and—sent a rush of charge over the link. It felt like it was being shoved into him, activating all of the sensors in his motionless frame piece by piece.

"Megatron!" he gasped, scandalized, circuits tingling. This was professional, this was just business, they weren't trying to *overload*—

Megatron growled at him, "What, did you think there was ever going to be another chance?"

And even as he spoke, glimpses of Megatron's thoughts were still pouring past him across the link—both of them straining for control, for privacy, and too out of practice to achieve it.

Though Optimus saw the conclusion coming even before it was spoken aloud, Megatron's vicious whisper still struck him like a blow.

"Did you think that I would—what? sneak out to meet you, knowing who you are?"

Optimus wondered how much of his own thoughts were open now, exposed to Megatron—Megatron who was also Hadron, and the dissonance of that still rang through his whole being like a bell. He could see a vision in his or Megatron's imagination—he didn't know which—of slipping away from their staff, in disguise again, going somewhere lonely and anonymous to meet and *touch* and somehow not care about the war or what they had done and what they were doing—and he saw the impossibility of it.

They wouldn't even be able to talk.

"Did you think that we might have some kind of illicit *affair*?"

He'd known that they couldn't, he'd known that before, but it was washing over him now, despair coming down in a torrent. All the sweetness, all the light that had so suddenly arrived in his life—his friend, his confidant, his lover, *Hadron*—and they wouldn't even be able to *talk*.

"I won't, Prime. I *won't*. This is it, you overblown pile of scrap, this is our last chance, and you can take it or—"

Optimus pushed a wave of charge back across the link, and Megatron cried out.

And then they were falling into it together.

He had truly forgotten what this felt like: someone else manipulating your sensor net from within. Even if Megatron wasn't employing much finesse, he had power and intensity and boldness that tore through Optimus's frame in bright, shocking bursts of pleasure.

And then there was experiencing his lover's pleasure so directly—not just hearing the sounds they made and watching their face and frame, but *feeling* it. Optimus tugged on something in Megatron's sensory system and felt his reaction to it—what he liked best, how affected he was. The element of surprise was missing, and you couldn't get the same range of sensations you could from manipulating a frame, but it was fresh and new and intimate—and oh how Optimus wished

Megatron could be spiking him at the same time—

So he pushed a snapshot from his memory of just that over the link—not the whole encounter, and not his conflicted feelings of guilt and grief and lust, though Megatron could probably glimpse those thoughts anyway—but just a few moments: the heavy, deep strokes of Megatron’s spike, clever fingers toying with his node, the intensely sweet sting of a hand hitting his aft.

Megatron choked out loud, and warbled something wonderful and incoherent.

The reverb from his reaction shivered through Optimus’s circuits, and he would have arched his body if he could have.

His partner was panting now, vents gusting hot air against the Prime’s back. There was an edge of chagrin and delight to Megatron’s thoughts, and he said, “You’re not playing fair, Optimus.”

Optimus grinned. “I think you can live up to the challenge.”

And Megatron *did*.

He sent lewd little pieces of memory that made Optimus fill up with embarrassment and arousal—the view of Optimus’s own valve as the rim stretched around a growing spike, accompanied by a focused mental touch that made his valve ache, and then later, when he’d spread his legs to display debauched, puffy valve lips spilling transfluid—and other things, like how Megatron had felt when thick fingers curved into him as he was riding Convoy’s hand.

And then, snippets of memory Optimus wasn’t sure Megatron meant to send, or that he sent carelessly, shoving them across their link before he could dwell on them too much. Optimus-as-Convoy on the couch, his visor dim and lips parted, waiting for another kiss. Surprise and pleasure, watching a small navy hand cradled in Convoy’s larger one. Laughing, watching Optimus’s mouth as he sipped at his drink at their little table in the bar.

Optimus’s spark ached, too full, too afraid to think of whatever came next.

Even though each bittersweet thought hurt him, the emotional whirlwind between them was only growing in intensity, drawing them both higher and higher. And then, he hesitated. One memory in particular pressing up to the surface of his mind, even as he tried to hide it, keep it back—

“Come on, Prime, don’t tell me you’re afraid,” Megatron said, half gasping, and half afraid himself.

He wished he could turn around and take Megatron’s hand, wished he could hold him and touch him and look at him.

But he wasn’t afraid.

Optimus sent a longer sequence. This time, he left his emotions in the memory: his awe and wonder, all his greedy pleasure at each reaction, all his joy—and sent the memory of gently touching three fingers against a precious spark.

Megatron cried out, and Optimus could feel the echo of how Megatron had felt in that moment, and the way remembering it brought back a tender ache.

Then there was another careless—or not careless, more impulsive—transmission across their link: Megatron in Convoy’s lap, sparklight flickering, and then a cut-off impression of shock and pain, which—oh.

And Optimus didn't want his lover wondering for even another instant, it didn't matter that it was all out of the question now, it didn't matter that of course it had been *for the best*—so he shared the matching memory of how frantically he had wanted to reciprocate.

Megatron only grumbled aloud in a static-filled voice, “Ridiculous Autobot,” like he hadn't obviously wanted to know, and he stroked charge in a wave over Optimus's intimate systems.

So Optimus sent more: the press of his mouth against that responsive core of light, the squeeze of a valve around his fingers as he licked it, the gorgeous flare and snap of charge as that beautiful spark throbbed in overload.

A torrent of overwhelming emotions washed over Optimus, and then, like Megatron had reached into his pleasure systems and yanked, they both fell into overload.

Megatron came down from the shared overload venting hard and still connected to Optimus's systems. He could feel pleasure still reverberating in both their minds.

“Optimus,” he murmured, trying to get the Prime's attention. “Optimus, I'm sending you the program.” And he prodded him, mentally, to get him to accept the packet.

“Nngh,” Optimus said.

Trying to push down the disorientation of...of all that they had just done, Megatron mentally pushed at him again. “You have to open it, then you'll run it on me, and I'll run it on you.”

Suddenly, he felt a sensor ghost—the sensation of something touching Optimus's face—something he'd forgotten about what hardlining was like. They hadn't been touching, themselves or each other, so he hadn't been getting those echoes of what touch felt like on his partner's plating. What was touching Optimus—oh.

Tears.

Silly Autobot. Though Megatron had very first hand evidence that most of the cause of them had been an overwhelming overload.

“Optimus,” Megatron said slowly. “Go ahead, open the program.”

Optimus sighed, sounding and feeling exhausted, and finally obeyed. He said, “So we'll do it at the same time? I'll run it on my hardware with you as the referent?”

Impulsively, Megatron hesitated. It was the last time...and there was something he wanted to know.

“Yes,” Megatron said. “But first, before we separate—”

“I can't overload again,” Optimus interrupted. “At least, not if you want me to walk out of here.”

Megatron rolled his optics and sent Optimus a jolt of his amusement across the link. “No...I have a question for you.”

Optimus, still lax and satisfied, hummed an affirmative.

Megatron didn't speak it aloud. He sent it as a half-wordless inquiry, wrapped in the memory of an exchange of messages with Convoy. *You said that you agreed with Megatron's—my—early work. True yes/no?*

There was a stutter of surprise, and of pain, but the *yes* came without reservation.

Oh. Megatron didn't know what he'd expected. That it had been part of the act?

Optimus vented for a moment. Then, less organized and kind of jumbled, like he had quickly tried to cut out his emotional entanglements as he sent them on, were memories of the conversations between Convoy and Hadron. Right and wrong and faith and love and freedom, and it felt like they were having the conversations all over again, each of them parrying ideas back and forth in an instant.

See? We agree on more than I ever thought possible, came through to him in not-quite-words over the link.

But Megatron couldn't help but reject that idea: *No, we/Megatron/Optimus Prime don't agree.*

He tried not to feel the slight mental flinch of response from Optimus, who conveyed, *Not so simple. We are we/Megatron/Hadron/Convoy/Optimus.*

Megatron pulled on the emotions he felt in the present and held them down tight, as close and private as he could. *This is not some rambling intellectual exercise we can indulge in for pleasure! This is our reality! If we/Optimus Prime/Megatron agreed then the war would be finished.*

And then Optimus sent a complex tangle of feelings, images, concepts. *The caste system/functionism/what-happened-to-you was evil. Orion—who-I-was was insulated from the worst, but he/I still saw it. You tore that down. But then you tore everything else down, too. You know I will always fight that.*

Then, Megatron glimpsed a winking brightness of not-light in Optimus's mind that might have been the Matrix—and wasn't that unsettling. There was a flurry of images and concepts too fast to parse completely: form and function and Primus and hotspots and Vector Sigma. He wasn't completely sure whose mind was responsible, but it finished in the vision of an unfixed future where their people continued on in an unbroken line.

But then Optimus ruined it with, *If you/the Decepticons/violence win, one day the faction divide will be just another caste system.*

Violence is not a synonym for who we are, Megatron shot back. He almost wanted to withdraw at that point, but Optimus pre-empted him.

No—you're right. I know that. And then, *You contain multitudes.* Whatever that meant.

Megatron scoffed at him, sending an accusatory quote from Convoy's messages back—*didn't you tell me you thought 'Optimus Prime' wouldn't be able to avoid that either?*

The Prime almost shuddered, though neither of them could move, and Megatron caught a glimpse of a deep well of something painful there. Optimus shared, *I don't think I can. But I'll try if I have to.*

Well, what was the pit-damned point then. Megatron gave in and pressed his own vision into the mind entwined with his: the Decepticons, surrounded by *strength* and *safety* and *security*, continually winning those things for themselves by defending a great, glowing, growing circle of

Cybertronian control, with Cybertron as the thriving center of it all. *You won't do what needs to be done to create a future/continuation/new generation for our species. I'm the one who will ensure the survival of our people, not you.*

Optimus communicated, *Every ensparked Cybertronian is equal to every other. And I know the lives and freedom of intelligent/sentient/like-us organic species are as worthy as our own.*

Frustrating, ridiculous, Autobot—

I will not buy Cybertron's safety with the lives of innocents. Even if they are different from us. Isn't that what you were fighting against?

Megatron growled out loud and shoved at him, mentally, reiterating the contradiction in *Optimus/Hadron's* beliefs that they'd already discussed—though *at the time* Megatron hadn't been aware of the imminent real-world consequences of his stubborn over-moralizing—*Didn't 'Convoy' tell me that free will came from the spark? Doesn't that make a spark the proof of personhood?*

And he felt the mental stutter in response, Megatron could even see the internal dissonance, two principles, each as solid as adamant, and it was a surprise to him that *Optimus Prime* held the principle of equality for all Cybertronians so very, very dear—Optimus gathered himself to share, *I won't pretend I have a valid/sound/good-enough argument that combines those two claims, but I can't compromise on this point. Why can't you see that they are people too?*

Another jumbled set of mostly unrelated thoughts pressed into him, thoughts about kindness and love and hope and peace and the goodness of the world. *We don't get to throw away other species just because we can't explain the metaphysics of their free will.*

But Megatron flooded over him, *Don't you know that for all the places like Daydream, there's another organic world where mechanicals don't have rights? These 'people' aren't precious, they're dangerous. I don't want to 'throw them away,' but you seem to want to throw Cybertron/our home/our future away.*

You can't deny someone personhood because they don't like you—that isn't how it works.

And Megatron couldn't help it, he pressed anger and bitterness and solid, fire-forged defensiveness into Optimus: *Every time you quibble over what aliens count as sentient/alive/people you're opening the door to the same kinds of arguments/ideas/lies that let your predecessors pretend that I wasn't a person.*

Megatron/Hadron/lover, please, that isn't—

No, *no*—angry, Megatron thrust his determination, his loyalty, his *certainty* across the link: *I am Megatron, and I will never betray the Decepticon cause.* And on the heels of that, not quite on purpose, he shared, *you/Optimus are not a traitor either.*

Then, with a sigh that wasn't from Optimus's body, but rather from his mind, like a great sweep of calm wiping the tangled heaviness away from them both, Optimus said aloud, "Have I answered your question?"

Megatron felt strangely numb. He was full of new and strange information, and none of it had really been integrated yet. There wasn't time to think through it now. One thing was certain. Convoy was as much the Autobot Prime as he had ever been.

"Run the program," Megatron said.

They did. As his limbs came back under his control, Megatron cancelled the connection and withdrew from the Prime's ports.

Soon, he was standing. He saw Optimus wipe the tears from his face before he brought his mask up again.

It was pretty easy after that.

They still had everything they'd had in subspace coming in—apparently because for once Optimus hadn't shared every Cybertronian secret with a friendly organic species—so Optimus hacked through the side wall with his axe. It spilled them out into a neighboring cell—empty, without the forcefield running.

As they started down the corridor, weapons hot, Optimus said, "I wish I'd asked Angred *where* we were."

"Would she have been stupid enough to tell you?"

Optimus just grunted, pointing at a window along the hall they'd just turned into. Or, more properly, a porthole. Because they were in space.

Wonderful.

They heard the murmur of voices nearby—possibly those guards they supposedly had, so they went the other way and Optimus axed them through another wall.

It was still easy after that, though it took them awhile to figure out the pay-stations.

Megatron just destroyed one in a previous room with his blaster, but Optimus stared down at the next said, "Oh. It wasn't a mistranslation then."

As he explained, apparently, the Ongredix charged tolls at any door they reasonably could.

"But who charges these tolls? And how do you know about this?"

"I think they barter for ownership, but some are controlled hierarchically. And something vaguely similar was mentioned in that book, remember?"

"You can't be serious," Megatron said. But of course Optimus was being serious. "That book Convoy—you were reading—the tragedy where the 'tragic' part is a failed business arrangement—is from *Axis 4*? And you never once considered that it might offer some clues towards how completely insane these people are?"

Optimus laughed a little. "I probably should have taken the hint, shouldn't I."

Contemplating how to destroy the device this time, Megatron scratched idly at a spot of purple paint on Optimus's shoulder. It looked wrong next to his regular paint job. Optimus looked at him, but didn't say anything, and after a moment Megatron stopped, stepping away.

"Do you regret it?" Optimus asked softly.

Megatron sneered defensively. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Getting involved with some stranger you met on the grid.”

“Do you?” he immediately shot back.

Optimus averted his optics, looking pained and saying nothing, so Megatron aimed his blaster lazily and shot the paystation. The door in front of them opened. Before he crossed the threshold, Megatron looked back at his companion and said, “I knew I was taking a risk. I thought the risk was worth it.”

Optimus hesitated. “...But it wasn’t worth it?” he asked.

Megatron rolled his optics and gritted out, “Don’t be stupid, I wasn’t *wrong*. We just happened to be especially unlucky.” And he turned and walked through the door, muttering to himself, “You can thank Unicron.”

Eventually, they got to a corridor outside an airlock, and retreated when they saw the group of guards standing outside it. At least, they retreated when Optimus insisted that they didn’t have a plan.

“Where are we going to go when we get off the ship? We don’t know where we are.”

Megatron scoffed, “I’ll fly. Drag you along.”

“We don’t know if they have onboard weaponry. We’d be target practice.”

“They’re backwards aliens—”

“Who successfully captured us. And who knows where we are in space? We’d been out for hours.”

Ugh. He hated when the Prime was right. It made him insufferable.

“Alright. We need to find out if they have shuttles, or get to a communications console—”

But their efforts were interrupted by a very loud explosion from the airlock and the whoosh of depressurizing atmosphere. Megatron’s vents closed and stopped trying to circulate air—conserving heat and preparing to preserve his internal pressure.

In unspoken agreement, they both charged towards the disturbance.

Turning a corner, Megatron saw the ruin of what had been the airlock, and—

Soundwave.

Soundwave and no one else—no, there were two cassettes. Megatron spotted Ravage and Laserbeak in the rapidly clearing smoke. All the Ongredix guards seemed to have scattered or been blown out into space.

Had he come alone? Straight from Daydream Station without any other backup?

But then Soundwave spotted Optimus and he immediately had a blaster charged and trained on him. Megatron didn’t actually think, he just acted—and put himself in front of the Prime.

His third-in-command’s confusion was visible, facing down Megatron’s outstretched hand and defensive posture, but he lowered the weapon.

Megatron turned his head and nodded to Prime, who slowly nodded back.

That section of the ship was exposed to the vacuum of space by then, so speaking was impossible, and their comms were still jammed as well. Soundwave knew the situation better than they did, so Megatron gestured to him, and he understood enough to take the lead.

Soundwave led them to the gaping hole that was the airlock and stepped into the cold of space. Megatron could see a small Decepticon shuttle parked below them in the black. He grabbed Optimus around the waist and stepped out too, bringing them both down to the hatch of the shuttle with his maneuvering thrusters.

Optimus seemed to be making some kind of protest about this, but, well, Megatron couldn't hear anything, so that was too bad.

Once they were in the pressurized cabin of the shuttle—the same shuttle Megatron had taken down to Daydream Station—Megatron realized he didn't quite know what he was going to do. Ravage and Laserbeak hovered, discreetly flanking Optimus. The Prime looked like he was gearing up for some self-righteous speech about how he wouldn't be a pawn for their evil Decepticon plots or something.

Fortunately, Soundwave spoke from the console at the front of the shuttle.

“Autobots: have been contacted. Rendezvous: scheduled for fifteen minutes from now. Autobot Cosmos: meeting us in space, halfway between Decepticon shuttle and Autobot ship.”

Later, he found out that they'd been held on an Ongredix ship in the Axis system itself. Since the ransom demand was made before their captors had left Daydream Station, Soundwave had been able to track them, catching up in the Axis system.

Optimus did object to having to be carried again, but he was nothing but dead weight in open space, so there was nothing to be done about it. The Prime tried to put his foot down and physically refuse, out of some kind of misguided stubbornness, but Megatron surprised him by taking him out at the knees with an arm.

He hefted him up that way, one hand holding the Prime under his back, the other lifting his legs.

It wasn't a quick journey, both their ships having stayed well out of firing distance, and Megatron found himself fidgeting, rubbing his thumb over the place where new paint ended and old paint began on Optimus's abdomen. It didn't come off. Optimus was looking at him again.

They couldn't speak in vacuum, so Megatron said nothing when he passed the Prime over to the little Autobot satellite.

It wasn't until they had parted, and Megatron and Soundwave were watching Cosmos tow Optimus back to the Autobot ship, that the reality of it hit him.

It was all over.

That had been his last goodbye with Convoy.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

"I was accidentally dating Megatron."

"We'll need to analyze this for any information we can use against the Autobots," Megatron said in a flat voice to his third-in-command. "You already have access to the correspondence. Make of it what you will."

Megatron was in front of his desk, looking out of the viewport, Soundwave behind him. He hadn't cleaned up yet after their little adventure. Small patches of navy were still left on his frame.

More quietly, he said, "I can't make any sense of it myself."

He couldn't make any sense of it, but he couldn't stop thinking about it.

"How can—how can they have been the same?" he said, almost to himself. "My processor still isn't convinced it's *possible*."

His emotional subsystem kept tripping over the proposition *Convoy=Optimus*. So many of his accepted premises about Convoy just didn't *fit*.

And he kept forgetting that he couldn't message Convoy anymore. He kept thinking to himself, *Convoy would enjoy hearing about this, or, you should ask Convoy about that*. At least he knew he wasn't the only one suffering.

His processor kept trying to impose Optimus Prime over his memories of Convoy—and the shape fit, but it just *didn't work*, or it was horrible, or wonderful, or any number of conflicting things at once.

His imagination fused several memories together and presented him with the agonizing image of Optimus Prime oh so lovingly kissing his *spark*—and that, that just wasn't—

"How can this be real?" he growled, and slammed a hand down on top of the desk.

Unexpectedly, Soundwave placed a steady hand on one of his shoulders, and Megatron stilled.

"Megatron: will never be alone," Soundwave said.

He had to look down then. He'd expected—he didn't know what he'd expected. That Soundwave would put into words all the silent accusations Megatron had been hurling at himself? Quietly, he said, "Thank you, old friend."

They stood in silence for some time, as his thoughts still raced.

Sitting behind the desk where he'd composed so many messages to Convoy seemed too much for this conversation, so eventually Megatron just sat down against the wall. Without comment, not even a sardonic head-tilt, Soundwave sat down next to him.

After a while, Megatron began to talk.

He talked about Convoy. About what he'd been like. About the future with him that Megatron had imagined was possible. The future that wasn't possible at all.

And Soundwave listened.

Eventually, Ravage joined them, wiggling his way out of one of the air vents and stalking over. Without speaking, he pushed at one of Megatron's knees and got him to shift into a better position. Exercising total confidence, Ravage climbed over Megatron's legs and curled up in his lap. Megatron rested a hand on the little mech's back, and his tiny engine hummed.

"Ravage: skilled in this area," Soundwave said.

The three of them rested there for a long time. Megatron spoke about the Ongredix and their bizarre culture, about Convoy and Optimus Prime, about the line they'd crossed together in that cell, about the things Optimus had told him. And then he spoke about the old, old days. The days when the revolution had only been an idea that he spoke to Soundwave about late in the night cycle, when they were sure no one could overhear.

When he had run out of the need to speak his mind, Megatron sighed, and leaned his head on Soundwave's shoulder.

"Thank you, my friends," he said.

Optimus wasn't in the cargo bay this time. There was hardly a point to secrecy, not after Megatron had carried him through space to be handed off to Cosmos near the *Ark*.

It hadn't been very subtle.

Sunstreaker had brought him to a private little room, neither of them saying anything in response to curious glances in the halls. The walls of the little room were liberally splattered with various colors of paint. Apparently Sunstreaker used it regularly.

They were both quiet at first, as Sunstreaker set to work on sanding off 'Convoy's' purple and blue from his frame.

Optimus was still...not quite right. He hadn't been debriefed yet, and he wasn't looking forward to it. He'd taken one look at Prowl when he got back on the ship and said, "I want this paint off right now."

Angred and her ilk, and then the actual official representatives of Axis 4, would need to be dealt with eventually. But it wasn't urgent, not within the next few hours. And he needed to think. It was easy to think with just Sunstreaker there.

He would need to tell Ratchet what had happened.

He would need to tell them all.

But Ratchet would be the one to check his processor for anything untoward.

His processor and his spark both felt tied in knots, but not with anything the medic could repair. How was he supposed to act normally after this? How was he supposed to go on?

How would he ever face Megatron again?

Sunstreaker was working on sanding his arms now. Into the silence, he said, "I'm so sorry, Sir."

"For what?"

"For...what happened? You were kidnapped."

"Oh. Yes." Somehow Optimus had forgotten that was part of what he was dealing with today.

"Is Hadron alright?" Sunstreaker asked.

Optimus just stared at him for a moment. Right. No one knew yet. Probably no one but high command would ever be cleared to know the details.

What would they all say?

Sunstreaker stopped sanding, looking alarmed. "Sir?"

Optimus took a deep vent. And then another, and then another. Feeling like he was watching his vocalizer form words from some distance away, Optimus said, "I was accidentally dating Megatron."

Sunstreaker dropped the sander on the floor and it rolled away from them with a series of loud clanks and clatters.

He hurried over to pick it up and said, garbled, "Excuse me, I must have an audial glitch. What was that?"

What was the harm in saying it again?

"I was accidentally dating Megatron."

It felt good to put it into the air. Like the waves of sound would carry the truth away from him.

Sunstreaker went back to sanding, and he was quiet for a long time. He was starting the base coat of primer when he finally spoke again. "Sir, I'm sorry if this is rude, but...what the fragging hell?"

Optimus actually laughed. A little hysterically, he said again, "I was accidentally dating Megatron!"

Sunstreaker looked up at him, expression comical. "Are you telling me that Hadron *is* Megatron?"

After that, more and more spilled out, like he couldn't hold all the horrible awful truth inside anymore. He told Sunstreaker about how Megatron had gone in disguise, like Optimus, using his mass-shifting ability. How neither of them had suspected a thing. How everything had been wonderful until it...wasn't.

Sunstreaker guided him to stand and started painting primer on his legs again. The sensation was calming. "And then...you both got kidnapped?" He said, frowning at Optimus's knee.

"Yes." The question was funny—the whole situation was funny—but Optimus's processor was stuck. He was remembering how excited, how hopeful he had been the last time he'd been painted

by Sunstreaker. How bright and sweet and good the promise of that night was supposed to be for him and Hadron. At least Sunstreaker wasn't visibly horrified. He hated to imagine, say, Prowl's reaction to this news.

He vented very deeply and confessed, "We made love."

Sunstreaker briefly lost control of his brush and had to wipe off splatter from silver metal sections of Optimus's plating. Then he set down his tools and focused up at Optimus's face from where he was sitting on the ground. "Okay. Like you'd been planning on, right? That must have been quite a shock, finding out after—"

"No," Optimus said, not wanting to take the easy way out. "No, I—you don't understand. We made love after I knew it was him."

Sunstreaker froze.

Optimus couldn't stop there, so he kept going. "Our disguises broke—during. His mass-shifting, and then my voice, and then—and then I didn't want to stop, and he didn't want to stop, so we just kept interfacing."

"Oh, Prime," Sunstreaker murmured, standing up.

He looked down at his hands, remembering how spark energy had fluttered against them. "I'm so sorry. The leader of the Decepticons... I've betrayed—I've betrayed everyone."

"No, you haven't," Sunstreaker said, looking sad. "Prime, of course you haven't."

Optimus met his optics. "Why aren't you disgusted with me?"

The frontliner opened his mouth, then closed it again. Grimacing, he said slowly, "You were in love with him. You were hurting. And—well. Sometimes I hate the Decepticons."

Then he looked seriously into Optimus's face and said, "But we're all on the same damn battlefield, doing the same damn things."

Optimus resisted the urge to cry again, and put one hand on Sunstreaker's shoulder. He leaned on him a bit and said, "Yes. I suppose you're right." And then, "It's funny, really. Just yesterday, I was telling you how we shared so many of the same values."

Optimus thought quietly for a while and Sunstreaker went back to work. It was a comfortable silence. He'd been expecting judgement—harsh judgement. Maybe disguised with politeness or deference, but still. He'd expected to see disgust on Sunstreaker's face.

"Sir," Sunstreaker said as he was mixing up the proper red color for the first coat, "What are you going to do?"

"Do?"

"Yeah. About Megatron."

Optimus said, "I—nothing. There's some politics to handle with the Ongredix, but—"

"No," he replied, looking awkward. "I mean, you said he didn't know, and he was in love with you. So what are you going to do?"

Optimus recoiled. "I'm not going to try to use that for the war if that's what you mean—"

He probably should. Prowl would probably try to talk him into it, and SpecOps would—

“No, no, I don’t mean for fighting...” Sunstreaker hesitated. “Nevermind.”

“Please, speak your mind, Sunstreaker,” Optimus coaxed.

“It’s just, you said you and Hadron agreed more than you disagreed?” The artist turned his optics to the can of paint he was holding again and offered, “Megatron doesn’t compromise on things without a very good reason. You’re in a position to give him a very good reason.”

“What kind of a good reason?”

Sunstreaker looked at him meaningfully. “Offer him something he wants?”

Very suddenly, Optimus remembered what Megatron had imagined, as they started hardlining. An illicit affair. Except...would it have to be illicit?

“He was a gladiator, so he probably likes grand gestures. Something with drama?”

Did you think that I would—what? sneak out to meet you, knowing who you are? Megatron’s words flitted through Optimus’s processor. And then, *I’m the one who will ensure the survival of our people, not you.*

“He might say no,” Optimus said quietly.

“Yeah,” Sunstreaker nodded. “But if you don’t try, you’ll never know. And...’Hadron’ went to a lot of trouble to see the romantic stranger he met on the grid.” He looked down and started prepping an airbrush to apply the big sections of red. “I don’t know. Ignore me. It’s none of my business anyway.”

“No, I—” Optimus said, “I really appreciate it. Thank you. And thank you for not being upset with me.”

Could he really do this?

“Okay, might as well push my luck.” Sunstreaker pursed his lips thoughtfully, and said with a smile, “Was he any good?”

Optimus couldn’t hold back a very embarrassing rev of his engine. He stammered a bit and pulled his processor back from the very delightful place it was drifting. “Yes?”

Sunstreaker actually winked at him, and Optimus laughed.

“You’ll be happy to know he liked my paint,” Optimus added.

Sunstreaker’s optics widened and he grinned, “I’ll take out an ad. Sunstreaker’s Fine Detailing: Even Megatron Liked It.” Then he squinted and bit his lip. “Uh, with that in mind, want me to switch out the colors on your array too?”

Optimus groaned in embarrassment, but then he nodded. “I might not need it.”

“If you don’t, then you don’t. No harm done.” Sunstreaker examined the Prime’s chest plating critically. “And you know what, I’m going to add some fine-line detailing. Nothing different from your usual, just thin pinstripe emphasis. Subtle, but eye-catching. We can even polish you properly for once.” The shorter mech looked up at him. “So, want to go for it?”

“Yes, Sunstreaker. I do.”

Optimus was standing on the bridge of the *Ark*, waiting for his call to the *Nemesis* to be accepted.

The conversation with Prowl had been long, longer even than Ratchet’s exam. Jazz had made it back to the ship in the middle of it and burst in, apologizing to him profusely.

Of course it wasn’t Jazz’s fault. How could they have known that Angred had planted a strange organic-based tracking device on him? Ratchet had discovered that little passenger on his plating while comparing his new scans to older copies. What with all the changes to his paint, the discrepancy had gone unnoticed before.

And then, the rest of it had been even more uncomfortable.

Everyone had gone still and quiet when he’d explained how, exactly, he could be sure that Megatron hadn’t known the truth all along.

But after Ratchet found no evidence of processor tampering, well. They’d listened.

Prowl had insisted that he get some defrag in first, but then they’d accepted his decision.

In the meantime, every Autobot security code, every troop distribution, every arrangement of station defenses that Optimus had somewhere in live memory was being revised, if possible. He didn’t think any of that secured information had leaked across to Megatron, and after his extremely thorough exam, neither did Ratchet, but it was better not to take the risk.

When he’d come onto the bridge, paint newly-pristine and polished to a high shine, everyone had looked at him curiously. Most of them were probably wondering why he’d been carried back to the ship by Cosmos the previous night, but he thought he caught a few lingering glances at his aft too.

When he approached the comm station, Blaster even said, “You look really nice, Prime. What’s the occasion?”

Hopefully someone else would think he looked nice too. But Optimus didn’t even try to explain. “Thank you, Blaster,” he said, “Please hail the *Nemesis*.”

The officer’s surprise was unmistakable, but he obeyed.

So now here he was. Waiting.

And then Megatron was on the screen. Vaguely, Optimus saw the captain’s chair he was lounging on, and Starscream and Soundwave to his left and right.

“Well, Prime?” Megatron said lazily, for all the world like he hadn’t been intimately entwined with Optimus only the day before.

Holding on to his confidence, Optimus said boldly, “We want to make you an offer, Megatron.”

“Oh really?” Megatron frowned, the first sign of self-consciousness Optimus had seen, and Soundwave shifted.

“We’ve both been wasting time in endless negotiations for the monzanite we both need. I’m ready to take a different approach,” Optimus said. Before anyone got any ideas, he added, “We still won’t let you harm the people of this system. However...the Ongredix don’t need to know that.”

Megatron’s optics lit up bright and he leaned forward with a greedy smile that did not affect Optimus in any inappropriate ways whatsoever.

“Why, what a ruthless businessmech you are, Prime. Who would have guessed?”

Starscream leaned over, blocking Megatron from view, and screeched into the conversation, “Are we talking shilling them or going in corporate?”

Prowl spoke up from Optimus’s left, “We’d like to discuss the details later, at a neutral meeting place.”

“So, are you interested?” Optimus asked Megatron.

The response was a shallow smile and a confident nod, after he had shoved Starscream out of the way.

After some back and forth in which Starscream insulted Prowl’s intelligence and insisted that the Decepticons choose the meeting’s location, they were agreed. Prowl was expecting a decision on time and place within the hour.

Optimus didn’t feel relieved.

There was no guarantee that these talks would go well. And of course, there was the other part of his plan.

Once he was back in his office, Optimus powered up his datapad. He hesitated and considered rewriting it again—but if he did, would he ever manage to send it? And all there was to lose was his pride.

So he sent one last message to Hadron’s account.

[AGS 22.679.03.15 09:22:15]

Origin: CONVOY, user-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Destination: HADRON, author-member: CYBERTRONIAN PHILOSOPHICAL FORUM

Maybe you’ll think I’m being foolish for sending one last message. But I don’t think we’ve said everything, not yet.

I want peace. If you agree, I will bring everything to the table that I can to negotiate to end this war—regardless of what happens between us on a personal level.

We are the only ones who can make the decision to unite our people. I know we both want an equal Cybertron, a Cybertron without castes and without oppression. I think peace is the best hope for achieving that.

I understand now what you said about putting organics on the same level as the low caste. And I understand what you said about special obligations to our own species.

I won't lie—I still don't agree with your conclusions. That's the biggest point of disagreement between us. I'm willing to be flexible about the practical details and how to best protect our people, but I can't compromise on the rights and personhood of other species. If we can overcome that disagreement, then...everything else is possible.

You once said that we complement each other. That we could accomplish anything together.

Before all of this, I never would have believed we could have the kinds of conversations that are in our message logs. But we did, and now, I think you want the same thing for Cybertron that I do. I think that if our factions work together, we can rebuild our world.

And then...there's also my selfish hope. You see, I'd still like to prove to you that love isn't just a processor glitch.

I don't want an illicit affair. I don't want to hide anything. I'd like to tell everyone, right now, if you wanted. I want to be with you, and I want peace, and I think that both of those things are possible. I know that asking for this is selfish. I know it might complicate or endanger an attempt at peace. I know that this is more risky and more dangerous than giving my spark to someone I barely knew.

But I think you're worth the risk. So I'm asking.

Would you be my lover, truly?

I expect you already know how I feel about you, after what we shared. I'll never forget what the touch of your mind was like. But I haven't actually told you, and that's important.

I love you.

I want to try.

Yours,
Convoy

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

When consulted for this article, the famous Starscream said, “Of course I was there! And it wasn’t romantic, it was disgusting!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When consulted for this article, the famous Starscream said, “Of course I was there! And it wasn’t romantic, it was disgusting! Anyway, who cares? The negotiations—where I took the lead—were much more important than where that out-moded old [expletive] decided to stick his [expletive]!” When asked to clarify whether he was referring to Megatron or Optimus Prime, Starscream blocked this reporter’s comm code.

– Spotlight, “The Daydream Accords”

For reasons Optimus still found suspect, the two factions met at the Hotel Sway on Daydream Station.

Apparently, it had a conference center.

The Lilili proprietors had to be aware that they were hosting something vaguely resembling diplomatic talks for the species that still held the galactic record for ‘Longest Civil War.’ But they weren’t showing any self-consciousness about it that Optimus could detect. He’d been tempted to take an image capture of Prowl’s face when they’d asked if he’d like to choose a caterer for their ‘event.’

Megatron still hadn’t replied to his message.

Not even to say ‘no.’

Once they got around the table the negotiations themselves went swiftly, Megatron plowing through objections and back-and-forths with total ruthlessness. Optimus wondered if that was anger at him in action. Though Megatron seemed cool—barely even bothering to look at him. As if nothing had happened. As if he didn’t care.

And the whole Decepticon delegation was typically belligerent, no surprise there. But several elements of the proposal that Prowl had expected to be a sticking point for their enemies were oddly just accepted without comment.

And there were other odd things.

Swindle of all mechs was at the table with Starscream and Megatron. The only other Decepticon

with them was Ravage, pacing silently around the room, possibly as Soundwave's representative. Optimus wasn't sure if the absence of the Decepticon third-in-command was a show of trust, or the opposite.

On the Autobot side, Optimus had Prowl and Jazz at the table, with Ironhide as backup elsewhere in the building.

No explanation was given for Swindle's inclusion in high-level negotiations, though he was contributing often, starting with: "Now that we know these granite-obsessed slag-suckers are real game-players, we can start getting down and dirty." Whatever that meant.

As the day went on, it became clear that Swindle had met and negotiated with Angred as much as the members of high command, and his comments gave Optimus more and more insight into what the Decepticons' negotiating strategy had been before the unexpected kidnapping.

They'd just come to a hard-fought agreement on negotiating with the Ongredix *together*—when Swindle shared an idea.

"These chumps like glory, and they like money," Swindle said. "If we can give 'em a good-looking deal that feels like they've bagged a win, then we'll be good to go—"

"I am not bowing and scraping for a bunch of backwards organics," Starscream hissed.

"Oh, you won't have to—you see, *we'll* be rescuing *them*," Swindle said.

"From what?" Optimus asked across the table, not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"The evil Autobots, of course!" Swindle announced, proud, before he remembered just who he was talking to.

"Swindle," Megatron growled, leaning back in his chair and glaring at the ceiling, looking lazy, though somehow he still reminded Optimus of a coiled spring, ready to launch into action at any moment— "Get to the point."

"Right, right, see, they already think *we're* the ones who know what's down, as they say—the ones who drive a hard bargain. The Autobots are the ones they've been giving the runaround," Swindle explained. "So, the Bots do a few harmless strafing runs over the planet—no biggie—and we come in, offering them our services as a protection detail, which brings their price down and gets the deal done quick."

Prowl frowned, disapproving, and said, "And what's to stop you from taking the monzanite and running? Your solemn promise?"

"Well, uh..." Swindle said. "Or...we could tell them we'll negotiate with the Autobots for them? Bring back demands and stuff? Then we'd end up with two separate contracts."

Starscream tapped his fingers on his Hotel-Sway-branded datapad with as much drama as possible. "I like it," the seeker said. "It's a little bad cop, bad cop, but we could make it work."

Optimus interrupted, "'Strafing runs' are a step too far for the Autobots."

Then Jazz contributed—he hadn't been speaking much so far, but Optimus knew he'd have a thorough analysis to share afterwards. "These guys would try to get out of a contract like that as soon as they can manage it. Maybe they wouldn't honor it at all."

“Very true,” Prowl said, but before he could go on, Megatron interrupted him.

The warlord shifted his posture completely, leaning forward with both hands pressing on the table and optics staring intently across at them. He said slowly and decisively, “Not a strafing run—a firefight. Their sensors aren’t good enough to tell the difference, so we’ll stage a quick space battle for them.”

And then, he grinned.

That was the breakthrough in their negotiations. Not that there wasn’t plenty of arguing after Megatron’s declaration, but the idea was accepted. They would work on which faction would play which role in their plan after a short break.

Outside in the corridor, Prowl was just saying, “I’m still having trouble believing Megatron is coming to the table for talks like this at all, never mind the actual plan—” when, from somewhere far off, Optimus heard a loud screech.

“*This* is the secret you’ve been hiding for weeks! This?!” the familiar voice shrieked. “You are worse than—than *Skywarp*, you degenerate *sap*,” Starscream yelled. “Your processor is deteriorating in your old age, and you’ve turned into a *lovesick idiot*—”

Starscream’s distant tirade was interrupted by a great clang, which was followed by a roar of rage that Optimus would know anywhere.

“Is *this* why you’ve been so nice to me, you rusting pile of slag—”

So Starscream knew then.

Optimus felt sick.

If that was his reaction, then of course Megatron hadn’t responded to Optimus’s more personal offer. The Decepticons would never respect him if he considered it. And Starscream was right, too: it was all stupid and degenerate and ridiculous.

The Prime, his lover? Those words must sound like the most repellent treason to Megatron. Optimus felt like a fool all over again. Megatron must be disgusted by his message, he probably thought it was pathetic—

And now Prowl was looking at him just a little too knowingly, so Optimus turned away to hide whatever his optics were doing to give him away.

“Excuse me, Prowl,” he said quickly, not waiting for a reply before heading down a side corridor.

He only needed a few moments to gather himself. His second-in-command would follow after him sooner or later, but just a little time was all he needed.

Alone in an unfamiliar hallway that looked the same as all the others, Optimus turned and rested his forehelm against the wall. He let his shoulders sag a little. Deep vents brought the cool, clean, treated air of the building rushing through him. He focused on that sensation and used it to pull his aching spark under control.

He went over his values, one by one, steadily reminding himself of what mattered: his people, his Autobots, his friends, Cybertron, and above them kindness and goodness and hope.

There was still hope.

Hope had brought him here: to negotiate a historic agreement with the Decepticons.

Hope had led him to meet ‘Hadron’ in the first place. Hope had convinced him to try that one last useless message. But even though Megatron didn’t want *him*, the leader of the Decepticons had still come here ready to negotiate. That wouldn’t have happened before.

And that wasn’t nothing.

There might not be any other agreements after this. There might never be the kind of peace he wished for. Megatron might never agree to even try negotiating something more permanent. But this wasn’t nothing. It mattered.

Megatron was negotiating, and it didn’t matter what Optimus was feeling, that simple fact was worth everything he was going through.

He could still hope for peace.

His mind and spark were calming now. He knew it would be a long time before he had fully processed everything that had happened to him these past few months, but he would approach these negotiations with the attention and even the excitement they deserved. He was the Prime.

Optimus heard the sound of approaching footsteps, but not the light patter of the Lilili staff. The tread was fairly heavy actually, so it was probably Ironhide. He never did like when his Prime was out of sight in strange places. Optimus straightened up, turning to look, and choked on the reassuring greeting in his queue.

Megatron was striding down the hall.

Optimus registered distantly, *I’m not ready to be alone with him*, but there wasn’t anywhere to go. His spark whirled erratically.

And Megatron wasn’t stopping—not even slowing down, like seeing Optimus in his path didn’t phase him one iota. Actually, he was speeding up.

He must have meant to simply walk past Optimus on his way somewhere else. Maybe he would say something as he passed, but what would Optimus say back? What if he didn’t say anything, and Optimus had to watch him go without even the balm of an acknowledgement?

Optimus held himself still and hoped none of his confusion showed on his face.

He would be polite and unshakeable. The situation was precarious, and one wrong step with the Decepticon commander could bring everything crashing down.

And then he realized that Megatron was—smirking?

His wicked mouth looked predatory, just a hint of teeth visible as it curved up to one side, and his bright optics were focused directly on Optimus. His big, intimidating frame was coming closer and closer.

And then—Megatron wasn’t trying to move past him at all. He was just still coming, face intent,

until he was so close Optimus could feel the air from his vents. Then Optimus was too startled by the commanding grip of two big hands on his waist to even consider struggling, so before he knew it, Megatron was pressing him effortlessly up against the wall.

“Oh,” Optimus said.

Megatron only chuckled, still smirking. And then those hands were moving, and Megatron’s hips were pressing him against the wall instead, which—it couldn’t—he didn’t—he *hoped*—

One warm hand cupped the Prime’s jaw, tilting his face up. Megatron’s fingers splayed over his audial. His thumb brushed the vulnerable metal under Optimus’s optic, just at the edge of the battle mask.

He could bear it if—if this wasn’t—

“Don’t mock me,” Optimus breathed out.

Megatron’s optics stuttered, surprised. And then he came even closer and let their forehelms touch, nudging his nose against Optimus. The other hand came up to cradle his face, too.

“I’m not mocking,” Megatron said. A lingering kiss was pressed to one side of his mask, and he could feel Megatron smile. “I’m saying yes.”

Optimus shuttered his optics and shivered all over, every one of his joints recalibrating as he took in unexpected data.

“Lover,” Megatron whispered, his lips brushing over the battlemask.

Optimus blinked his optics back on, looking into fierce red. Then he initiated the transformation sequence for his facemask, and he grabbed at Megatron’s shoulders and dragged him in even closer and kissed him.

It wasn’t even a proper kiss, more like shoving their faces together—but that was *fine*, Optimus didn’t care, he wanted—he wanted to be as close as possible.

But soon Megatron held his helm still and took control, and desperation shifted into passion.

Optimus realized he was making small, needy noises, and he tried to control himself, but the relief was just so intense. Megatron was *here*, he had *said yes*.

But Megatron hadn’t actually—and how could Optimus go on without knowing—

Optimus pulled away, breathless, and holding tight to his own resolve. “I can’t do this unless there’s a future. Please, what I said, do you agree?”

Megatron was still cradling his helm, but he looked more serious now. He didn’t hesitate. “Yes. We’ll start with a ceasefire and then begin the real negotiations, but I can’t promise that those negotiations will be—”

“No, I know that. I know you wouldn’t agree to become—to become lovers unless you wanted to try for peace. If we were still—that would be—” Optimus flexed his hands against Megatron’s plating, in anticipation of maybe having to let go. “What I mean is, will you agree about how to treat other species? Their rights? Their lives?”

Megatron opened his mouth to speak, but Optimus wasn’t quite ready to hear the answer. He

interrupted, “I can’t give you a rule or a set of criteria or anything to determine which species ‘count.’ And I don’t know what it would look like in reality—what limits or requirements to set. We’ll have to work out the details in negotiations—but the theory of it, the idea that we should treat other sentient species as equals: do you agree?”

He just looked at Optimus with still, focused optics for a few moments, and then he shifted the grip of his hands and tilted the Prime’s face up to him and kissed him once, gently.

“It’s difficult for me to accept when I’ve made a mistake,” Megatron said. “Amazing, how another mech can point out biases I never knew I had. I know this is the best way forward.” And then, “Even so, I have two conditions.”

Optimus braced himself.

“First, follow whatever pseudo-mystical, pseudo-scientific ideas you please to decide what other species ‘count’ in the galactic community. But—and I will want this codified in whatever document we end up with—every single being with a spark is sentient. They count. No loopholes, no exceptions.” Megatron’s optics had narrowed into slits, watching him closely.

Optimus nodded, a little frantically, trying to hold back the tide of hope in case it turned into disappointment.

“Second,” Megatron said, slowly and deliberately, “Will you prioritize Cybertron?”

Immediately, Optimus said, “Yes.”

“No, Prime. Think. Will you put Cybertron’s interests first? Will you protect Cybertron? Even if that means you can’t always rush in to play the hero for whatever organic species it is this week?”

Megatron’s mouth had twisted a little as he spoke, and Optimus could feel the tension in his hands. The moment stretched out between them, bitter and full of memories.

Choosing his words carefully, Optimus said, “Someone once told me that we have a special obligation to our own species. I thought he was very compelling.” He tried to offer a smile, but with the way his spark was aching he wasn’t sure he managed it. “Yes, I agree.”

Optimus barely had time to see Megatron’s optics go all bright before he was being kissed again, thoroughly. When they broke apart again, he pressed his face close, cheek to cheek with Megatron, and said quietly, “This is going to be hard, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“It could all fall apart.”

“Yes.” Megatron pulled back to look at him and stroked his thumb gently over the curve of his cheek. “And you were right—whatever this is between us might make everything worse.” He leaned their foreheads together. “But I’ll listen to you. And you’ll listen to me, won’t you?”

Optimus smiled and whispered, “Yes.”

He barely had to move before they were kissing again, and soon Optimus wasn’t quite holding his own weight up anymore. Megatron was taking his time in the most agonizing, intoxicating way. One long, pressing kiss, and then tugging on his lower lip, their mouths sliding together. Every drawn-out brush over pliant metal was zinging through Optimus’s sensor net and easing the tension in his frame. Every lingering kiss wrapped around his spark.

Every single moment was a declaration, as if their lips meeting was another way of saying: *I am here with you.*

They were really doing this. This was really happening.

Megatron, his lover.

After several thorough, triumphant minutes of enjoying Optimus Prime's lips and mouth and intriguingly dexterous tongue—Megatron remembered their first kiss.

He pulled back, grinning. "Well?"

Optimus smiled in return, with that same dazed, pleasure-drunk look that Megatron remembered so well from the couch in their hotel room. "Well, what?"

Megatron let his grin turn a little bit wicked and dragged his thumb over the Prime's bottom lip. "Do you still love it?"

Optimus barked a surprised laugh. He tried to cover his face, but Megatron caught his wrists playfully. "Come now, I have to know if my technique is as good as you remember," Megatron teased, his spark dancing with delight in his chest.

"It's only been a few days." Optimus grinned. After a pause, he said in a low, quiet voice, "I love being kissed by you."

Megatron felt his expression soften. For a moment, they just smiled at each other.

His spark was swelling in his chest again. Just like it had when he'd read Optimus Prime's letter.

It had been like getting a message from a ghost. He'd been closeted with Soundwave when he got the notification, discussing the upcoming meeting with the Autobots, and what the diplomatic overture meant.

At first, he'd seen that he had a message from Convoy. And he forgot. He forgot everything that had happened.

He'd felt the generic kind of happiness he always felt when he saw Convoy's messages, and then, as he began to remember, there was a sort of euphoria. As if for one fraction of moment, his processor thought Convoy had come back. That there had been some kind of mistake. That there was some chance—and then he'd remembered.

It hadn't even taken a full second. He'd passed through one extreme emotion into its antithesis in one single moment. And then back again.

Megatron hadn't known what to expect when he read it. But whatever he'd expected, he'd never thought to dream of this.

I love you. I want to try.

His reverie broke when a still-smiling Optimus said, "In hindsight, I can't believe I didn't recognize you. That smirk is very distinctive." Then he looked Megatron up and down, considering

carefully. “I think I must have been distracted by how adorable you were.”

Megatron’s optics went wide and he didn’t have to fake surprise. “Oh, is that how it is, Prime?” he said with exaggerated affront, trying to hold back a smile.

Optimus stifled laughter as he said, “Yes, it’s too bad, now you’re too big for—”

But if there was one thing Megatron knew how to do, it was turn the tables on Optimus Prime. Before he could finish speaking, Megatron was gripping him around the waist with swift, sure movements, and—just, lifting him.

“Gnnh,” Optimus said, gratifyingly, looking down at him. He settled his thighs around Megatron’s waist.

“It must be so inconvenient to have a lover just as big as you,” Megatron said with mock seriousness. Then he ducked his head and pressed one, two, three lingering kisses along the glossy seam of Optimus’s chestplates, and got a lovely little shiver out of the Prime for his trouble.

Resting his chin on his lover’s chest, Megatron looked back up and grinned. “So boring. No benefits at all.”

Optimus mumbled something under his breath.

“What’s that?” Megatron teased. “There are some benefits? I would never have guessed!”

Optimus only rolled his eyes in reply, and very dramatically too, so naturally Megatron needed to put a stop to that. He ducked down again and drew his tongue along the top of edge of the Prime’s windshield. As an experiment, he bit lightly on the near corner, and when he lifted his gaze he could see that it was a *very* effective distraction.

“So you wouldn’t rather have an adorable little neutral in my place, then?” Megatron asked, smirking, knowing the answer.

Optimus paused, his lips parted as he looked into Megatron’s optics, and then he said, “I would choose you over every ‘adorable little neutral’ in the galaxy.”

Megatron watched those determined optics, that expressive mouth. He could have this. He *did* have this. Optimus Prime, his lover. His to kiss, and touch, and tease, and persuade, and...

Quietly triumphant, he said, “You love me.”

The reaction was adorable. Optimus bit his lip, and his optics glowed, and after a moment his two gleaming smokestacks puffed out a cloud of steam and his whole face scrunched up in embarrassment. His spark twirling happily, Megatron had to go back to nibbling on Optimus’s windshield to keep from laughing.

Still visibly holding back the tide of embarrassment, Optimus said simply, “Yes, I love you.” Impossibly, it was even better to hear out loud. Then Optimus let his thighs drop from Megatron’s waist and revved his engine. “Now put me down!”

Megatron hummed with pleasure. Between licks to Optimus’s chest seams, he said, “Why would I do that?”

“Because, Megatron, I can’t kiss you from up here.”

A fair point. Megatron did let him down, but he wouldn't let Optimus come close. "No, not yet, I want to look at you."

"You want to what?"

"You look so different from when we were last together," Megatron said, putting some space between them and getting a good look at the whole edifice of Optimus Prime's heavy-duty frame.

Megatron had noticed the change as soon as he'd seen the Prime on that comm call. It was impossible not to notice: his plating had gleamed so much it actually looked wet.

All new paint, and more than Optimus would have needed just to get rid of the rest of Convoy's colors. Every line was fresh and crisp, and up close Megatron could see all the delicate embellishments. In their meeting Megatron had needed to look away from him entirely to keep from being distracted.

Megatron pursed his lips and ran a finger along a line of the new detailing. "Is this shine for me?" he purred.

"No," Optimus said.

Megatron gave him a look.

"Yes," Optimus admitted, as Megatron's fingers kept stroking the newly-smooth surface of his plating.

"Well then. Shall I admire you?" he said, flashing a predatory grin.

"Isn't that what you're already doing?"

"Oh, no, Optimus." Megatron splayed his palm over the Prime's back, and that fine gloss felt just as good as it looked, liquid smooth. He found and traced the edges of plating with his fingertips. "I intend to take a more *hands-on* approach."

Optimus grumbled at him, but he sighed when Megatron remembered that particular spot on his hips that he liked and rubbed at it, and then he gasped when Megatron nudged his legs apart to press him even more thoroughly into the wall.

"Megatron—" Optimus said, exasperation clear in his voice.

"Mm, yes, say my name like that," he said, half serious, and started on a series of licks and kisses along the glistening red of the Prime's shoulders.

Optimus growled, but arched up into the contact all the same, his hands clutching at Megatron's chest.

"Megatron, we can't—I'm not popping my panels for you in a public hallway."

"Just can't control yourself around me, can you?"

"That's not—"

"Speaking of your panels, how far down does this repaint go? Did you polish your spike for me, Prime?" Megatron drawled. Optimus actually squeaked in response, which was magnificent. Megatron bit lightly at his shoulder and continued, "Is it as big and shiny as the rest of you?"

“Did you really just—” his disbelief broke into a garbled sound when Megatron grabbed a handful of Primely aft and started to rock their hips together.

“What was that, sweetspark?”

“We both have to be clear-headed in—oh, Megatron,” Optimus moaned after a particularly lewd grind of his hips.

“Is that so?” Teasing Optimus was such a fun game, Megatron wasn’t sure he’d ever get tired of it. He rose up and guided Optimus to bend his neck so he could start running his teeth and tongue along one of those attractively fluttering finials.

“This isn’t fair. Do you have any idea how charged up I’m going to be?”

“Oh no, it’s very fair. After how distracting you’ve been?” Megatron bit gently on sensitive plating and felt Optimus shake. “I’m the one who had to sit across the table from you—” another bite, “while you looked good enough to eat. All this pretty polish just begging to be roughed up.” Working his way up, he sucked indulgently on the tip.

“Nnngh,” Optimus said.

Letting the deliciously smooth finial slip from his mouth with a ‘pop,’ Megatron teased, “It was rather underhanded of you, trying to sway me with all of this.” He let his hands glide down suggestively over the smooth angles of Optimus’s hips and leered.

Optimus got that wonderful scandalized look again, but he still shot back, “It worked, didn’t it?”

Megatron hummed thoughtfully. “The thought of getting my hands on you was certainly motivating, but no. Your letter convinced me.”

Optimus looked a bit stunned for a moment. Then he pursed his lips, in a shape that Megatron immediately wanted to kiss. “When you didn’t reply, I thought...and now you’re here.” He caressed Megatron’s shoulders as if to prove it was true. “I assumed there was some other reason that made you decide.”

There was that strange, half painful, half sublime feeling in his spark again.

Convoy was shy.

Convoy liked affection.

Optimus Prime *was* Convoy.

How incredible. How glorious, that this shy, sweet mech also charged fearlessly onto battlefields. That he gave orders without hesitation. That he served as a symbol of strength and resilience to the galaxy.

Everything Optimus Prime was—it was all a shield around this mech. This mech who liked holding hands and talking about hopeful, wishy-washy philosophy. This mech who was risking everything for Megatron.

“No, just your letter. I didn’t think there was a way through this until you showed me. I knew I’d need to speak to you before I could be sure, but I told Soundwave my decision immediately.”

“Oh,” Optimus said, a small sound.

Speaking low, Megatron asked, “After all, hasn’t anyone ever told you how well you write?”

That earned him a smile again. Megatron wasn’t sure he’d ever get tired of that smile. Then, with an expression that Megatron decided meant ‘mischief,’ Optimus said, “You know, there was someone once. Have you ever heard of a mech called Hadron?”

“Ha! You’re one to talk, *Convoy*,” Megatron teased, stealing a kiss.

After, Optimus’s mouth quirked up, and his face twitched through a series of almost-expressions. Each emotion written on his face for Megatron to learn to read.

“Since you bring that up,” he said. “You don’t wish—you don’t miss Convoy, do you?”

How could someone so expressive be so enigmatic. Megatron tilted his head, as if that would make Optimus more intelligible. Then the Prime said, in a familiar firm and determined voice, “I wouldn’t blame you if—”

“Of course I miss Convoy,” Megatron said. “Convoy was a fantasy of something I couldn’t have.”

“Oh. I’m—then—”

“Let me finish.” Megatron reached for Optimus Prime’s hand and held it, stroking it with his thumb. “Who is Convoy?”

“He’s...”

“He’s you, Optimus.” The Prime rolled his optics, but there was half of a smile now. Much better.

Because Megatron just couldn’t help himself, he shared something else. It was as easy to do it now as it had been in their letters. “What I *miss* is getting to playact at having a normal romance, a normal life. Everything else? It’s all right here.” And he lifted Optimus’s hand to his mouth and kissed it.

Big, blue optics gazed into his. The Prime’s lips moved several times, as if he was considering saying something more in response, but at last he just tilted his face up for a kiss.

Megatron’s spark ached, suddenly, fiercely, with that sublime pain, so he broke away and said flippantly, “Well, he’s you, except for how you’re almost as powerful as me, and red and blue—

“Almost?”

“—and obnoxiously stubborn, and the Autobot Prime—”

“I get the picture, Megatron.”

“Good. Though I could keep going.” Megatron slid an arm around the Prime’s waist. “Or I could go back to communicating my opinion on the subject through nonverbal means—”

“You are unbearable,” Optimus said, but he moaned into Megatron’s kiss anyway.

Megatron laughed when they parted and said, “By the way, do you still have that naughty little white line connecting your spike to your node, or do you reserve that for special occasions?” Megatron remembered it fondly. He hadn’t gotten nearly enough chances to admire it up close. And wouldn’t it be flashy, set off in red and blue?

“You can’t just ask me that.”

“But Optimus, I’m so curious.” Megatron started to suck kisses on his lover’s neck.

“Hnnng,” Optimus said, again, squirming with each brush of Megatron’s teeth over his neck cables. “I chose the design on purpose, for our...evening together.”

“You mean the night we made love?”

After he said it, Megatron felt the sharp intake, the way Optimus stiffened up. Megatron lifted his head.

“Did you think I wouldn’t put it like that?” How easy it was to say these things when each admission affected Optimus so much. He put two fingers under the Prime’s chin and tilted his face up. “I wouldn’t do what we did with just anyone.”

Optimus’s jaw trembled. Then his optics flashed, determined and fierce, and he said, “I think you know this already, but I want to say it.” He set one hand on his own chest and rubbed at the seam between his windshields. “When you offered me your spark, I wanted so much to say yes.”

Megatron’s optics shot wide and his vents hissed out air. That sublime agony was back, and he felt it in the shape of three fingerprints on his spark.

Optimus continued, “I was still keeping the secret, and—well, the Matrix isn’t exactly subtle.”

Oh. Megatron hadn’t considered a physical reason. He hadn’t actually considered *any* reason. It wasn’t the sort of thing he preferred to dwell on.

“That’s the reason you refused?”

“Yes.”

Megatron covered Optimus’s hand with his own, and he fancied he felt the pulse of the spark beneath. His own spark ached so much he couldn’t ignore it. He believed that Optimus was telling the truth, but even so... Optimus could still reject him. For some other reason, or for any reason.

But Megatron had never been one to shy away from danger.

“What do you say now?” he asked, and he folded his fingers around his lover’s hand and brought them together to his own chest. And there was another delicious expression to add to Megatron’s growing catalogue: Optimus Prime, his optics spun wide even as he frowned. Disbelief and hope, perhaps?

“Now?” Optimus almost choked on the words, “You still...?”

Megatron didn’t let his confidence falter. “Now. With you.”

“Please,” Optimus gasped. “*Please*, now.”

Optimus moved his hands to Megatron’s face almost reverently, and Megatron put an arm around his waist and held him close. He leaned in to nuzzle his lover’s cheek.

“*Megatron.*”

“Optimus,” he whispered, low.

Plating shifted against his chest as Optimus initiated the transformation sequence. He began his own, slowly, and looked down.

The first faint glimmers of light emerged between them, and then Megatron saw the first adventurous golden curl of Optimus Prime's spark reaching out, reaching out *for him*. He felt and saw his own spark throb with light, and then—then a first glimmer of sensation. It was completely different from the devastating touch of three fingers, and yet not different at all. It felt like euphoria, and he wasn't sure if that was coming from Optimus or if that was simply *what this felt like*.

"Oh, Optimus," he murmured.

He felt so much in that moment that he wondered if his spark might explode even before the first touch—but he decided he didn't care if it did. He pressed closer.

And then, something was touching Megatron's feet.

The sensation was followed by the unexpected sound of Soundwave's distinctive cough. But how...? He saw Optimus's optics flash open in a burst of blue, and they both quickly looked down to find Ravage's unruffled face stared up at them.

Megatron frowned. "Ravage, how long have you been there?"

"Ravage: protecting Megatron," came the response in Soundwave's voice. Of course. More transmitted sound emerged as Ravage casually wound his way around Megatron's legs.

"Soundwave: reminds Megatron. Corridor: equipped with security cameras."

"Oh," Optimus said.

With one more slight brush of sparklight zinging in the space between them, Megatron reluctantly closed the crack in his chestplates, and saw Optimus do the same.

"Thank you, Ravage," Optimus said, looking adorably mortified, and Megatron couldn't help laughing.

"This isn't funny—we're going to need to get that tape as it is."

"It's very funny, Optimus," Megatron said, moving to hold Optimus's face in his hands one more time. "Don't worry, I won't leave you wanting much longer. I even know just where to get a hotel room. Shall we say this evening?"

He softly kissed his lover's parted lips. Then Optimus put his arms around his neck and brought their frames flush, kissing him deep—

"Megatron and Optimus Prime: have company," said Ravage in Soundwave's voice.

They parted as one, and turned to find Prowl and Starscream at the end of the corridor, apparently frozen from the shock. Megatron spotted Ravage slipping off into a vent he was sure hadn't been there before.

As Prowl and Starscream recovered and started coming down the corridor, Optimus transformed his facemask back into place.

While they were still out of earshot, Megatron said, "Just so you know, I *can* mass-shift at will—say, for a night? Just the two of us?" And Optimus's optics went all bright and scandalized again.

But just as Megatron was turning away, a big hand on his waist drew him back in, and a sinfully low voice murmured in his audial, "Want me to carry you to the berth again?"

He loved it when Optimus fought dirty. “Naughty Prime,” he chuckled. “What will you do if I say yes?”

Prowl coughed, pointedly. And they drew apart to face their respective seconds.

Megatron smiled wide and said, “Good job, Starscream.”

Starscream’s optics crossed in an expression of impotent rage. “Whatever!”

Optimus leaned in and murmured to Megatron, “Good job doing what?”

“Hm? Oh, just keeping your entourage distracted during our little ‘private chat.’” Megatron smirked and saw the Prime’s optics glow with embarrassment again, turning up at the corners to betray a naughty grin Megatron couldn’t see.

Megatron watched Optimus for a moment longer. He was standing tall and gleaming on Megatron’s right. Megatron imagined that from the outside they must look less like two mechs and more like a wall, or a shield. Shoulder-to-shoulder. Unbreakable.

This was the way it ought to be.

This was the way it *would* be, forever—or as long as Megatron could manage it.

Optimus, his lover.

Suddenly, a hand shoved itself in front of Megatron’s face and waved erratically.

“Quit with the goo-goo optics already!” Starscream burst out, still waving. “Unicron’s rusty turbines, are you always going to be this disgusting?”

“Starscream...” Megatron growled.

Prowl neatly diverted the conversation by saying, “Speaking of which, Prime. I assume *this*,” he gestured broadly at Optimus and Megatron, “means we’ll be pursuing a diplomatic solution in the near future?”

“Yes, it does.” Megatron smirked and pointedly settled a hand on Optimus’s lower back. Out of the corner of his field of vision he caught Optimus rolling his optics.

Still looking slightly gob-smacked, Prowl said, “Congratulations.”

Prowl said something else—something about oversight, and conflicts of interest, but Optimus could deal with that—Megatron’s attention was drawn by Starscream’s posture. Arms crossed, he was tapping his foot on the floor with increasing speed, and he was squinting aggressively at them.

Scheming, no doubt.

Megatron was just making a mental note to have Soundwave keep a closer-than-usual watch on him, when Starscream made his move. He interrupted Optimus’s reply to Prowl by physically stepping between the two of them and turning his back on Megatron and Optimus. Megatron narrowly avoided taking a wing to the optic—for the thousandth time.

“Alright Prowl,” Starscream said, in that excited, manic tone that meant ‘revenge.’ “You’re intelligent. We’ll wrap this Ongre-whatsit thing up by tomorrow, and get to the *real* negotiations by the end of the week. We need something signed by the end of the year—”

“Starscream—” Megatron hissed.

“We appreciate your contribution, but—” Optimus tried.

“So we don’t lose the tide of galactic sentiment before we can host the public ceremony,” Starscream finished, proudly, still only looking at Prowl.

Optimus started to say, “I don’t think ‘by the end of the year’ is realistic—”

But Prowl’s optics went very bright, and he said, “Yes, Starscream. You’re right. It would be a public relations coup.”

Megatron was stunned into silence.

Starscream had no such difficulty, however. “Perfect. So I’m thinking Iacon, and we’ll buy up broadcast time on the Interlink—full galactic coverage, of course—and we’ll televise the whole ceremony. We’ll make it the media event of the millennium.”

Megatron had a bad feeling about this.

But Prowl was apparently keeping up with whatever this conversation was about. “Not Iacon, too many security issues. What about a landmark—Solus Rock?”

“Hm, yes. It would certainly be dramatic. We could get some amazing wide shots of the vista, with the ceremony at the—”

“Wait,” Optimus said, looking as confused as Megatron felt. “Are we talking about a treaty signing?”

Starscream whipped around to face them and laughed gleefully.

“Oh no, Prime. We’re discussing your conjunx ritus.”

The couple fought off the surprise Separatist assault still in their ceremonial finery: back to back, their luminous capes tangled, Lord Megatron’s war paint and Optimus Prime’s delicate filigree both smeared. An iconic moment. But not many know what had actually been planned for the most important conjunx ritus in Cybertronian history.

– Inquiens, 22.679: *An Unexpected Year*

S: Hello, and welcome to the program, Lord Megatron. I’m honored to have the unusual—

M: Love is more than just a processor glitch.

S: I—what?

M: I want that on the record.

S: Okay? Wait—where are you going!

– Megatron, interviewed by Slant, *Good Morning New Cybertron*

Is there any greater teacher than the push and pull of another spark? Like binary stars, each one fundamentally changed as they settle into orbit together.

– Hadron, “In Defense of Hope”

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This has been such an incredible project. I can't actually believe it's done? What? How? I've never done a Big Bang before and it was a huge challenge. I'm honored to be in company with so many incredible artists and writers.

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If you look carefully, there are a few little easter eggs in the Works Cited that hint at what happens next for Optimus and Megatron and Cybertron ;)

End Notes

Check out the [beautiful art](#) coppernickels created featuring Convoy and Hadron in scenes from Chapter 2 and Chapter 4! She was so patient with my very out of order draft during this process—thank you!

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I love comments so much, so I will definitely love yours—let me know what you think! And feel free to ask me questions about the philosophy. Find me on [twitter](#), and [tumblr](#), and [dreamwidth](#)!

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